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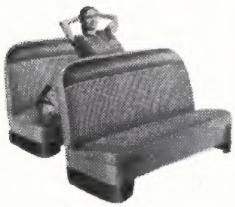

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Vol. 49, No. 3 FEBRUARY, 1953

A Complete Jim Hatfield Novel

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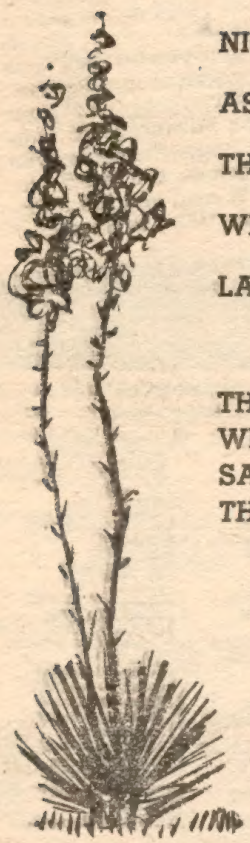
JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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Nevada's Glory Days

ONE summer about 75 years ago, a young Nevada rancher sat beside Carson River racking his brain for some method to boost water from the stream onto his parched pastureland.

Having an inventive mind, he devised and built an undershot paddle wheel. Powered by the current, it revolved and lifted a small but constant flow. Delighted by the success of his simple invention, he hurriedly dug a system of irrigation ditches and soon his rich grassland was green again.

Occasionally the paddle wheel would lift surprised trout out of the river and dump them into his ditchline. Perhaps it was that which led the inventive cattleman to plan a much larger wheel that would carry thrilled passengers. When the year 1895 came along, and the World's Fair opened at Chicago, he went there and built a gigantic wheel that loomed high over all other attractions. It was an immediate success.

Yes, gals and galluses, you guessed it. The rancher-inventor was George Ferris. And in all the years since, no fair or carnival is complete without a Ferris Wheel.

Far-Flung Fame

That was only one of many memorable things that came out of early-day Nevada.

Nevada's first and greatest contribution was three-quarters of a billion in silver and gold that flowed out of the world's richest bonanza, the Comstock Lode.

Virginia City was the hub of those fabulous diggings. In the dry and treeless hills a half-hour's easy drive south of Reno stands the fading, ramshackle remnants of this most famous ghost town of the West.

On the main street, amid saloons and gambling halls—they have a pleasanter word for the pastime now, "gaming"—stands the home of the Territorial Enterprise, Nevada's first newspaper and the literary birthplace of Mark Twain, who was a reporter, then editor in the boom days.

This pioneer paper, founded in 1858, is still published as a weekly. The old plant has become a museum, in which you see the battered desk where young Sam Clemens, alias Mark Twain, wrote "Roughing It." The original flat-bed press is there, too. It was operated by water power supplied by a flumeline 40 miles long, by a principle similar to George Ferris' paddle wheel. Pioneer Nevadans didn't have much use for water as a beverage, according to some accounts, but found that it had other valuable uses.

Sagebrush and Jackrabbits

The visitor who gazes out over the mountainous mine dumps and sees the crumbling ruins of Virginia City has a hard time convincing himself that here stood a city renowned for its fashionable hotels, elaborate restaurants and stores as fine as any in the East. In its heyday, Virginia City had a population greater than any city the sagebrush State has now.

The neighboring town of Gold Hill, now almost entirely gone, boasted a census of 30,000. Another suburb, Silver City, was

almost as populous.

Comstock millions supplied the foundation of many great family fortunes—Hearst and Mackay "Postal Telegraph", to name two still prominent families—yet hardly a dollar of those riches was used to develop and benefit Nevada. The treasured hills have gone back to sagebrush and the jackrabbits. Most of those who remain are involved in the "gaming" interests, picking at the skeleton of departed glory.

The green pasturelands where George Ferris lived and rode are richer than ever, however. Many thousand head of cattle and sheep graze in the deep grass of Carson Valley nowadays. The gold and silver are gone, but the good earth remains. And there's a lot of it in Nevada, well-watered valleys and the homes of prosperous stockmen.

There's Still Hope

There are some visionary mining men who insist that the Comstock Lode is not really exhausted. Only the surface has been scratched, they say. Deep under the old mines are deposits richer than any ever dreamed of, but how to reach them is the unsolved problem. The old mines were flooded. And the heat was so intense in the deep levels that hardy miners were able to work only in 15-minute shifts.

The man credited with the discovery of the Comstock Lode, Abner Blackburn, trapped in Carson Valley in 1849, and started a trading station there on the backslope of the Sierra, which was later named Genoa, and so became founder of the first town in Nevada, the ruins of which remain a few miles from "the smallest capital in the United States"—Carson City.

That famous editor of the influential New York Tribune, Horace Greeley, a stage passenger that stayed overnight at Genoa in 1859. The Comstock Lode had barely been discovered, but after a good night's rest in a feather bed, he beamed his iron-rimmed specs over Carson Valley, and it was then, according to local accounts, that he conceived that unforgettable phrase, "Go West, young man."

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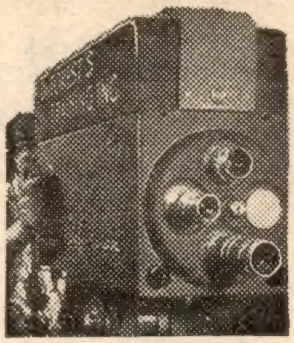

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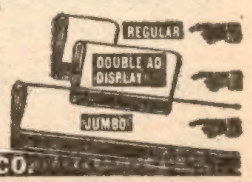

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WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range

News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

The Aztec Indians had a temple that was lined with more than 100,000 skulls, the remains of offerings to their gods. They seem to have let the old adage, that two heads are better than one, run away with them.

Sweetwater, Texas, gets its water from Bitter Creek. Which can probably be explained by the fact that some folks drink their coffee without sugar. And stop me if you've heard about the character who spooned eight heaping spoonfuls into his coffee, then made a wry face when he sipped it.

"If you want it sweet, why don't you stir it?" suggested the waitress.

The character glared at her. "Who wants it sweet?" he replied loftily.

He might have been from New Mexico, this character, but we think that's putting him a bit too far west.

Here's an item that will give you an idea as to the age of Western inhabitation: Santa Fe was established as a Spanish provincial capital 10 years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth in 1620.

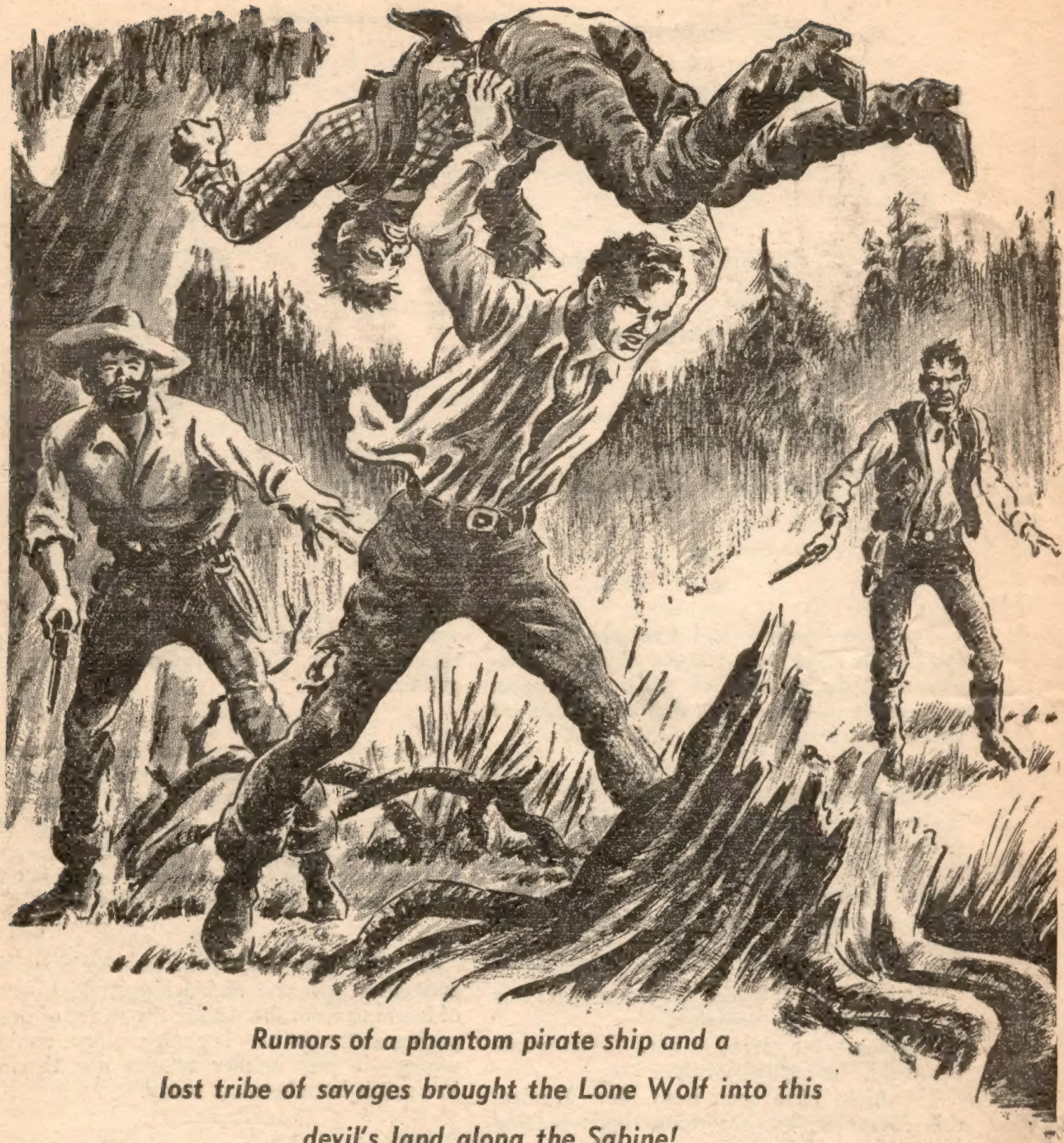
There are more geysers in Yellowstone National Park than in all the rest of the world put together—and including, of course, Texas. The inanimate variety of geysers, that is.

Calamity Jane, the renowned frontierswoman, was not called that for nothing, it seems. She was married a dozen times, and it is said that 11 of her husbands met illfatedly premature deaths. Anybody still want to argue that the female of the species is not either more deadly than the male?

In 1519 Hernando Cortez, the Spanish conqueror, got one of his biggest kicks out of learning from the Aztecs the secret of preparing a strange new beverage. Nope, you're wrong—it was neither tequila nor tiswin. We call it hot chocolate today.

Story making the rounds in Oklahoma: A little boy came home covered with oil, and his mother yelled at him, "Didn't I tell you not to dig holes in the yard?"

Armstrong County, South Dakota, said to be the most sparsely settled county in the country contains 15 ranches, which average 19,175 acres in size. A good place for agoraphobia, seems like.



Rumors of a phantom pirate ship and a lost tribe of savages brought the Lone Wolf into this devil's land along the Sabine!

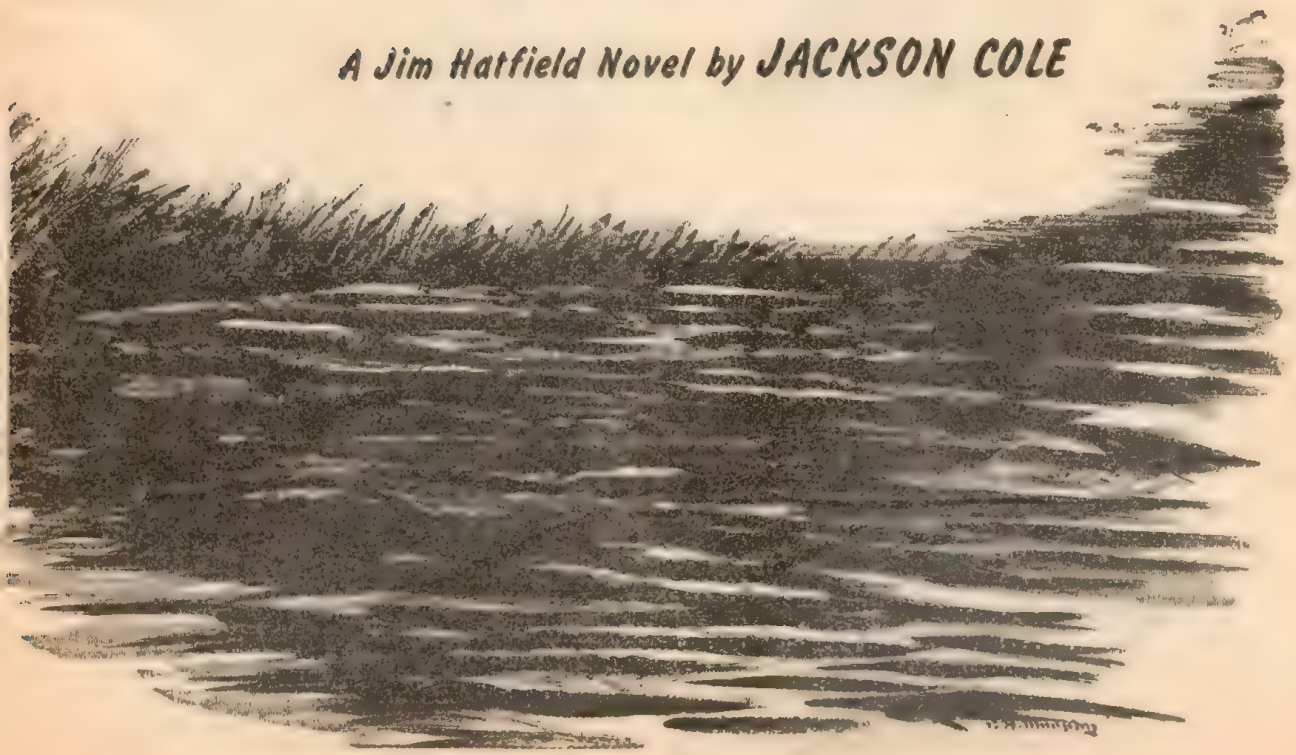
CHAPTER I

Brawl in Copper Bluffs

OUT of Beaumont, seat of Jefferson County, on his way to the Sabine River that flows between Texas and Louisiana, the big man on the great sorrel horse was in a thoughtful mood. He had learned little of value in the county seat. Only that Morton Coray of the Crown and Iron and Mike Donovan of the Stirrup were the biggest ranchers in the wild swampy Sabine country, and that one Natchez Dupree was considered the worst

PIRATE'S ROOST

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE



Jim Hatfield Braves Crocodile-Infested Jungles

of the desperadoes who lived in the region.

In shirt sleeves and vest, with brush jacket and slicker tied with his bedroll behind the cantle, there was nothing to indicate that the tall man was a Ranger. His clothes were rough and worn and sluiced with sweat and trail dirt. The two Colts he packed did not mark him apart in this tough frontier land. Only the man himself and the golden stallion were outstanding. Ranger Jim Hatfield, whom his captain long ago had dubbed the "Lone Wolf," hoped that neither of them would be recognized in Copper Bluffs and the bayous southward.

The Sabine with its tropical swamplands had always fascinated Hatfield. A weird and almost impenetrable wilderness territory, it was totally unlike the rest of Texas.

South of Copper Bluffs were the Smoky Canes and Bayou Lafitte, the Big Thicket and then Congo Bog, stretching southward to Lake Sabine and the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The Bog had once been the home of the Karankahuas or "Kronks," a tribe of cannibal Indians.

According to legend the old-time pirate, Jean Lafitte, had frequented the Sabine and established a hideout in Congo Bog, before he was captured in 1836. A mysterious country, steeped in blood and rich in historical lore, much of it yet unexplored.

Hatfield's present mission had been prompted by a new outbreak of piracy on the Gulf of Mexico. Rumors had reached Ranger headquarters in Austin of a sleek swift "ghost ship," faster and heavier-gunned and manned than any other Gulf vessel, which struck and vanished like lightning. The few survivors left from these slashing attacks seemed to agree that the pirate craft operated and disappeared near the mouth of the Sabine River. This might indicate that the old Congo hideaway of Jean Lafitte was again being made use of now by modern buccaneers.

CAPTAIN BILL McDOWELL had dispatched two Rangers to scout the coast around the mouth of the Sabine, and eventually work upriver if they found nothing on the coastline. Red Bouchard and Fox Edley, comparatively new to the organization, but veteran fighting mates of Jim Hatfield. The Lone Wolf himself was to move downstream from Copper Bluffs. Between them they hoped to uncover the pirate stronghold.

It was dusk when Hatfield saw the mist-shrouded lights of the settlement shining blurrily on the high plateau above the Sabine River. Riding in through the squalid low-lying Mexican district, he climbed to the bluff on which the main part of town was built.

Drowned in river fog, the drab frame and adobe buildings were no more impressive than those below. But there was more activity here. Riders and wagons traversed the gloomy streets, and a river boat hooted mournfully as it neared the sagging docks on the eastern bottoms.

"Sure don't look like much, Goldy," Hatfield murmured to his mount. "But some of the men we want may be holed up here for that very reason."

Too late for supper at the hotel, and there didn't seem to be a restaurant available. He'd have to make the best of it at a free-lunch counter in some saloon.

But first he located the livery barn and left the big sorrel there, with explicit instructions as to his care and feeding. An extra silver dollar guaranteed some obedience to his orders, and Hatfield's towering size and stern features furthered Goldy's chances of receiving the best the hostler could provide.

The horse's prospects were better than his own, the Ranger decided wryly, as he stretched his long legs back toward the main street. He moved with easy controlled assurance and careless grace, a man whom other men and women would turn to glance after in most any environment. Hatfield had that something which

marks the thoroughbred, be it animal or human. A quality difficult to define, but easy to recognize.

The Captain's Saloon looked as likely as any of the decrepit joints, and Hatfield turned in there with a self-effacing slouch and his hat tilted low over his fine, strong face. The place was well-filled and no one appeared to notice Hatfield's entrance.

He moved into an open space at the bar,

JIM HATFIELD

had a quick whisky, and carried a second glassful to the lunch table. There he spooned out a bowl of chili, selected some enchiladas from a platter, and leaned on the bar to make a meal of that Mexican fare. He was topping it off with his second drink, when a disturbance in mid-room brought his green eyes around over one wide shoulder.

A stumpy little man with a peg leg, very drunk, was laboring doorward through crowded tables. A large, broad individual with a dark scarred face thrust out an ornamented boot and tripped the cripple into a crashing fall. The others around the table, all bearing the cold-eyed insolent stamp of hardcases, laughed in hearty appreciation.

"That ain't funny," Hatfield drawled, his green glance clouding to stormy gray.

"It ain't smart either," said a man next to him. "That Pegleg Yance is the chief cookee of Coray's Crown spread. Most people don't meddle none with Crown hands, but Natchez Dupree probably figures he can get away with it."

"So that's Dupree?" murmured Hatfield, scanning the sneering, scarred features of the badman.

"Himself. And with him's as rank a lot of no-goods as you'll find in Jefferson County. Perley Bayles, Kronk, Tod Hunter, and the Swamp Eagle. Me, I'd rather mix with the crocodiles in Congo Bog."

Pegleg Yance was struggling to rise from the filthy sawdust, but Natchez Dupree stood over him and grasped his wooden leg, lifting it high in the smoky air until the small cripple rested on the back of his neck. Hatfield surged forward off the bar with sudden instinctive speed, his voice lashing out at Dupree's burly back:

"Drop him and come around, you half-breed scum!"

AS NATCHEZ Dupree let go of the peg leg and turned, his companions started rising from their chairs. Jim Hatfield drove straight into the bandit and smashed him backward across that table, scattering men and chairs, bottles and glasses, in every direction. Legs driving hard, Hatfield stayed on top of Dupree, the table collapsing beneath them with a splintering crash. As they tumbled apart in the wreckage, Dupree clawed at his guns, but Hatfield flung onto him again, sledging both fists into the dark face, clubbing Dupree's head against the floor.

They rolled and slid to the wall in a thrashing tangle, Dupree stunned and hurt but still fighting furiously, until Hatfield got a handful of his long, greasy hair and hammered the man's skull against

the baseboard with crushing force. Dupree went limp and senseless under the Ranger. Then Hatfield was up and turning catlike to face the concerted rush of the other four outlaws.

They were all over him before Hatfield could pull a gun, clobbering him on the wall with fists and elbows, boots and knees, tying him up and dragging him down under sheer weight of numbers. Once in the sawdust, they started working on him with methodical brutality, heedless of the few vicious licks Hatfield managed to land in return.

The odds were too much, and the Ranger knew he was in for a terrible beating, which might go on until the life was battered from his big frame. These fellows knew their work, and Hatfield's consciousness was already ebbing under the wicked punishment of four pairs of arms and legs. Pain shot through him in lightning flashes, deep and rending, and his efforts to fight back were feeble and futile now.

It looked like the end, and what an ending! Beaten to death on the floor of a crummy dive in a desolate half-forgotten river port. Against such odds, Hatfield realized he should have known enough to use his guns, but in his anger over the abuse of a cripple he had wanted to feel Dupree's evil face under his knuckles. Well, he had knocked Dupree out all right, but now he was on the verge of oblivion himself.

The jolting impacts ceased, all at once, and the smothering weight of four bodies fell away from him.

A voice seemed to come from a vast distance, "Crawl off, you dogs! And if you feel like reaching, go right ahead. If not, pick up your top skunk there and dust out of here. And don't come back until you're ready to fight the Crown and the Stirrup and all of Copper Bluffs!"

There were vague sounds of movement, then some man must have tried for his gun. Dimly Hatfield heard the familiar thwack of steel on bone and the thud of a falling body. That voice again:

"Now you got two to drag out. Get moving and make it fast, or I'll open up on you. That's what I'd do anyway if I had a grain of sense. Move out—and damn quick now!"

Dragging noises were followed by the squeal of batwing door hinges, then an excited babble of voices. Hatfield opened his bruised, aching eyes with an effort, seeing nothing but a steaming reddish haze at first.

Then the figure of a man swam into view, as his vision began to focus. A tall tawny panther of a man, standing easily, with guns still hanging in his big hands. As handsome a man, Hatfield thought irrelevantly, as he had ever seen. Blond and clean-looking, with a friendly, charming smile, built with grace and power blended into streamlined perfection. Fully at ease, casually sure of himself, he sheathed the irons and bent over the Ranger with earnest solicitousness.

"Hope you aren't hurt bad, friend. You want a hand up?"

"I'll rest a little longer," Hatfield mumbled through pulped, swollen lips, waiting for his head to clear and his strength to return.

"I'm Mort Coray. Appreciate your cutting in for Pegleg. Sorry the Crown wasn't around earlier to give you a hand."

Hatfield set his teeth against the multiple aches and pains. "Jim Harter. You came in good time. I'm all right now."

HE GOT up carefully, dusting dirty sawdust off his clothes. A man brought over a bucket of water and towels. Hatfield washed his hands thoroughly and swabbed the blood from his face. After ducking his dark head, he moved his limbs experimentally and explored the bruises on thighs and hips, abdomen and ribs.

Somehow he had escaped serious damage. Fine conditioning, natural resilience, fighting instinct and skill had saved him. Even so, Mort Coray had arrived just in time.

They walked to the bar together, a mutual liking instantly between them, and after a glass of water Hatfield joined Coray in a whisky. The other patrons of

the Captain's Saloon watched the two big men with respect and admiration. Nearly of a size, Hatfield dark and Coray fair, they made a splendid-looking pair of young men.

"Accommodations in Copper Bluffs are not too desirable," Morton Coray said. "If you are staying in the vicinity, I wish you'd accept the hospitality of the Crown."

Hatfield considered this briefly, and nodded with a painful grimace of a smile. "I'm obliged to you—again. Reckon I'll want to rest up a couple of days before I do much more riding."

"That's fine," Coray said, with his warm, bright smile. "We'll have a few more for the road, if you like."

"After that stomping I can use a few," Jim Hatfield told him, and they were as close and comfortable together at the bar as if they had been friends for a long time. One of those rare and inexplicable meetings between men.

CHAPTER II

The Corays of Crown

AWAKING in a comfortable white bed in a clean, airy room, Hatfield wondered for an instant where he was, then remembered it was his third morning in the Crown ranch house. Most of the soreness had gone from bruised bones and lacerated flesh. It was time to get on with his mission.

It had been pleasant at the Crown. Mort Coray and his sister Iris were the perfect host and hostess. Yet, in a way, Hatfield would be relieved to take his leave, in spite of the growing friendship between him and Coray. The girl was displaying too much interest in the Ranger, and she had a great deal of charm and appeal.

As usual, Hatfield had neither the time nor the inclination to become involved with a woman. It was better to move along. But first there was that wild hog hunt on which he had agreed to accompany Coray and Donovan and other Sabine ranchers.

Washing and shaving, Hatfield reflected on what information he had gathered during this visit. Scarcely enough to make it worthwhile, had it not been for his need of convalescing.

There had been a series of mysterious and murderous raids in the region, of late, nearly as savage as those perpetuated by the Karankahuas in the past, with severe losses of life and cattle. Some of the small spreads had been wiped out entirely.

Hatfield pondered on the possibility of the Gulf pirates operating on land as well as on water. Between strikes at coastal shipping, they might be hitting the scattered ranches in the Sabine country. If so they must be a powerful and well-unified organization.

Hatfield had found most of the Crown personnel and the neighboring ranchers friendly and agreeable, but in two men he had sensed a slight antagonism. Furlong, the Crown foreman, seemed to resent his presence, perhaps because of Iris Coray's obvious interest in Hatfield.

Iron Mike Donovan, the owner of the Stirrup, was vaguely hostile for no reason that Hatfield could fathom, unless it was natural dislike and distrust of strangers. On a range where cattle are being rustled with alarming regularity, any stranger is suspect, although Mort Coray's acceptance of Hatfield had cleared him with most of the Sabine stockmen.

After breakfast this morning, Mort Coray and Furlong withdrew to the office, and Hatfield was left alone with Iris Coray, something he had hoped to avoid as far as possible during the remainder of his stay. They wandered out onto the long high-pillared gallery of the rather grandiose Louisiana-plantation style manor house and took chairs in the shade.

Even with morning brightness on the land, and azaleas and camellias flaming beneath the post oaks of the spacious yard, there was a sunken, depressing quality of gloom about this country, it seemed to Hatfield. The evil odor of swamps was

never far distant, and the whole terrain seemed foreign to Texas.

"Strange to find a mansion like this on a ranch," Hatfield remarked, puffing on his after-breakfast cigar.

"The Corays started out as cotton planters here," Iris explained. "They turned to raising beef only when the demands of the Louisiana markets made that a far more lucrative enterprise."

"The other plantation-type houses around here are run-down and falling apart, I've noticed."

"Maybe the Crown has been lucky."

"With a man like your brother, you can't call it luck," Hatfield protested.

"You and Mort certainly took to one another, didn't you?" the girl said. "He doesn't really like too many people, either."

"Seldom liked a man so quickly and thoroughly myself," Hatfield said. "Reckon now I'd better go see to my horse."

Iris lifted a restraining hand. "You don't like to be with me, do you, Jim?"

"It's not that, Iris. I'm not used to girls, maybe. Kind of bashful, I guess."

"It's not that, either," she said flatly. "You just don't want to be bothered, I think. You want to get on—to whatever you're doing and wherever you're going."

HATFIELD smiled gravely. "Just drifting around, Iris. Not really doing anything or going anywhere. Just wanted to see this bayou country once more."

"Mort believes that. I might myself. But Furlong and Donovan don't, Jim."

"Too bad," Hatfield drawled, admiring the gray ash on his cigar.

"I didn't expect to frighten you," Iris said. "Simply wanted to warn you."

"It's appreciated, Iris," he told her sincerely. "Along with some of the finest hospitality I ever hope to meet up with." Hatfield rose to his lithe, rangy height, green eyes and hawk-face solemn and brooding. "Now if you'll kindly excuse me—"

Iris Coray stood up before him, a golden girl with sun-streaked hair framing a richly bronzed face and great velvet-brown eyes, the features cut with clarity and distinction, the nose proud almost to haughtiness, the mouth mild and gracious.

"Go ahead, Jim," she said softly. "I never try to hold anyone against his will."

After a long serious moment, Hatfield turned from her graceful full-bodied figure with an odd reluctance, a sharp sense of loss and waste, and strode away toward the stable. . . .

In the office, Mort Coray and his foreman were engaged in a discussion about their guest.

"How do you know who he is or what he's doing here, Mort?" demanded Furlong, a lank, rusty-haired man with a hatchet-face, cold blue eyes and a harsh, uncompromising mouth.

"I don't know and I don't care, Rod," said Coray calmly. "I like him—and Iris likes him. That's enough on the Crown."

Furlong went bleaker than ever. "Yeah, I've noticed Iris likes him."

"And that's why you don't?"

"Damn it, Mort, it's not a question of liking or not liking!" Rod Furlong declared. "The way things are going in this country we can't afford to take any chances on anybody. I got a hunch this Harter is dangerous."

"How can one man hurt us?" inquired Coray. "Even as good a man as Jim Harter? Forget about it, I tell you. He's my guest and my responsibility."

"He going on that hog hunt, Mort?"

"He is. And don't get any notions about spilling him in front of the tusks or accidentally shooting him in the back. I mean that too, Rod. I consider him my friend. I will until he proves himself otherwise. Anybody who crosses him is crossing me, you understand?"

"All right, Mort," sighed Furlong, shaking his rust-colored head. "You're the boss. But old Iron Mike figures he's tied in with them raiders and rustlers."

Mort Coray laughed with light merriment. "Iron Mike never did not like strangers. The older he gets the less he likes 'em. And he never liked my being too friendly with anyone else but him,

for some crochety reason. So you can discount that theory, Rod. Let's go out and see that horse of Harter's now. That sorrel's something."

"Yeah," agreed Furlong dourly, "I ain't got nothing against his horse."

That evening Hatfield drifted away from the big house toward the gaunt moss-hung cypresses of the lowlands, wanting to be alone for a space after a day of riding and working with Coray and his crew. Except for a few twinges the Ranger felt as good as new again.

The hog hunt was scheduled for tomorrow. Hatfield looked forward to the experience, but begrudged the loss of another day's time, now that he was fit for the saddle again. He was beginning to worry about Red Bouchard and Fox Edley down on the coast, or making a perilous passage up the Sabine.

A mistake in judgment in Copper Bluffs had cost Hatfield four days, and there was no telling what the extent of that loss might eventually prove to be. It might even mean the lives of Red Bush and the Fox.

And Hatfield had been on the brink of yielding to the lure of Iris Coray and wasting more precious time. He was disgusted with himself. He smiled ironically at the thought of what Roaring Bill McDowell would have said about such a lapse, had he known of it.

DUCKING under grapevines and trailers of Spanish moss Hatfield paused, and was leaning thoughtfully on a cypress trunk when he heard someone approaching in the thickening dusk. He knew it was Iris Coray, even before he caught a whiff of her delicate scent and saw the flowing grace of her form in the dimness.

"Don't be angry, Jim," she said, coming up to him. "I had to see you alone for a minute."

"Why, that wouldn't make any man angry, Iris," he said gently. "What is it, anyway?"

"Tomorrow on the hunt, you'll have to be careful. Watch yourself, Jim, and watch Rod Furlong and Iron Mike Donovan. I'm afraid they might try something."

"You mean they'd like to feed me to the hogs?" Hatfield laughed quietly.

"They'd do anything to get rid of you, I guess."

"But why, Iris?"

"I don't know exactly," the girl murmured. "Rod's jealous, because of me, for one thing, although he has no right to be. And Iron Mike sees a deadly enemy in every stranger who hits this range, especially since he's been losing so much stock."

"Well, I'll keep an eye on them, Iris," promised Hatfield. "I doubt if they'll pull anything though, knowing that Mort wouldn't like it. But I'll watch them as well as the wild boars."

"It's an insanely dangerous business anyway, with no sense to it."

"Just the kind of sport Texans would go for, hey?" Hatfield grinned.

Iris smiled up at him. "I suppose so." She swayed closer, her nearness stirring his blood, her face lifted in loveliness.

"We'd better head back, little girl," he said.

Her golden head shimmered palely as she shook it. "I don't get this at all. Usually I have to fight off every man who gets within reach. But you—I can't even get close to you, Jim. What are you afraid of?"

"I told you I was bashful." Hatfield took her arm, turning and starting her back toward the ranch, guiding her under mossy shrouds and looping vines.

Short of the manor, Iris Coray came to a determined halt. "One kiss and I'll go peacefully," she said, taunting and teasing him with her eyes and lips.

Against his better judgment Hatfield lowered his lips onto hers. It lasted longer than he intended, but not as long as the girl wished. Then, almost roughly, he broke away and hauled her on toward the lighted windows of the Crown ranch house, more shaken than he would have admitted or thought possible.

The long, lean frame of Rod Furlong was waiting at the veranda steps, his an-

gular-boned face sullen and menacing. He glared from the girl to Hatfield, and rage erupted almost visibly in the foreman.

"You take up a lot of room for a new hand, mister!" he said.

"I'm a fairly big man," Hatfield drawled.

"Bigger men than you have been cut down."

"True—but it takes considerable cutting."

Furlong was on the point of striking, when Iris's cool voice caught and held him. "Don't forget yourself, Rod. Mr. Harter is a guest of the Crown and the Corays."

Furlong spun and stalked away, muttering under his breath. Iris Coray laughed with a low musical sound, but Hatfield did not share her amusement.

CHAPTER III

Wild Hog Hunt

FROM the Crown the hunters trailed southward through cypress swamps and salt grass prairies, scattered with cottonwoods and scrub oaks, chinquapins and loblolly pines, to the rendezvous at the edge of Moline Meadows where ranchers and cotton farmers and townsmen were gathering to join the hunt. The place was crowded with horsemen and dogs.

Iron Mike Donovan was already there when the Crown contingent arrived, a squat, grossly fat man with a large bald head and a big-nosed heavy-jawed face. Donovan's homely features lighted amazingly at the sight of Mort Coray, then soured immediately as he spotted Hatfield.

With all hands present, they crossed more prairies of saw-bladed salt grass, pooled in places with stagnant water, and moved from open country into the dim soggy aisles of bayous where great gnarled cypresses and ancient post oaks shut out the sunlight. Odorous steam threaded the woods, and thick mustang vines hung from the branches.

Hatfield, riding beside Coray, again had the sense of something evil and poisonous about this damp, sunken land.

Mort Coray pointed ahead into the southwest. "Congo Bog, the upper edge of it," he said. "That's real swampland and plenty of it. Bordered by the Sabine on the east and the Neches on the west, it stretches ten miles south to Lake Sabine. No white man has ever gone very deep into the Bog and come back to tell about it. Full of quicksands and cottonmouths and God knows what else—or how many hundreds or thousands of men have disappeared in that sinkhole."

"Do you believe the story about Lafitte having had a hideout in there?" asked Hatfield.

"No," Coray said. "Nobody but the old-time Kronks ever lived in there, and it even killed them off finally."

"Ever try to go into the Bog, Mort?"

"I've been into the fringes—but not far."

"How about the Big Thicket?"

Coray smiled. "That's inhabited. But not healthy, Jim."

Before them now the terrain broke up into long narrow stretches of stagnant green water, separated by wind-riffled beds of reeds and dense clumps of clashing cane. A vile stench of wet-rot and decay filled the damp, green-hued air, and steam rose from the marshes, foul and clammy in the heat.

The first hogs began to break from their reedy hideaways and flee splashing through the lagoons, but the hunters disregarded them and pushed deeper into the swamp. This was not purely for sport, Coray had explained to Hatfield. The acorn-fattened piney-rooters were taken for their lard and pork.

Mort Coray indicated a large island of reeds and canes ahead. "Their final main hideout. That's where we start the fires to drive them out. They come hell-roaring then, and they take a lot of killing, Jim."

Hatfield observed that there was

Hatfield faced the concerted rush of the other outlaws

enough dry fuel to start a fire, if the ground were scoured long enough to locate it, but it seemed doubtful if any great blaze could be achieved in this drowned land. He watched with interest as the men placed their lard pails and rendering equipment on firm, dry ground under the cottonwoods, and set about gathering the driest possible kindling wood.

From time to time Hatfield felt hostile eyes upon him, and each time he turned it was to find either Rod Furlong or Iron Mike Donovan regarding him with unconcealed hatred. It was a trifle unsettling, since Hatfield was faced with the prospect of engaging in a wholly new and exceedingly dangerous form of sport here.

He trusted Goldy to avoid the charging swine, for the sorrel was a superb cutting horse, as quick-turning as he was fast and powerful. And the Ranger had well-founded faith in his own ability to shoot with speed and accuracy from a racing horse at a fleeing target. But there's no defense against a bullet in the back, and in the confusion and excitement it would be easy enough for Furlong or Donovan to plant one there. Purely accidental, of course.

BLACK smoke mushroomed from the main bed of the marsh as fires were ignited at several points. Soon the smoke was laced with flames from the dry brush and reeds. With a great snorting and grunting, the hogs began to burst from

cover and run splashing through water and sloughing through mud, and guns started blasting on all sides of the blazing reed bed.

Shoats and sows came first, sleek with lard, but Hatfield had to fire twice to drop his first wild hog. The younger boars emerged fighting, hooking with their wicked tusks. Hatfield was glad he was on a mount like Goldy as the sorrel wheeled away from one maddened, lunging hog, then spun clear of another before Jim could get a shot at the first.

Mort Coray, handling horse and guns like a master, had already downed three of the creatures. It sounded like a full-scale battle in the swamp as the hogs kept coming, and the men went on firing from their whirling, plunging ponies.

Hatfield had to empty his right-hand gun before his second victim went down, rolling almost beneath Goldy's dancing hoofs. The footing was treacherous, dead pigs littered the sodden earth, and Hatfield marveled that some of the horses hadn't fallen or been gored by the bolting hogs. And he was still half-expecting the clublike impact of a slug in his own back.

The old boars held out the longest and came out the maddest, monstrous fire-seared brutes with tough, scarred hides and tremendous shining tusks, roaring and snorting in a frenzy of rage and pain.

"This way, Jim!" yelled Mort Coray, pulling his bay off to the right. "They're breaking through over here!"

At a slight pressure of Hatfield's knee, the sorrel was off after the bay to close a gap that had opened in the perimeter of horsemen. Crashing through thickets of agrito and bindweed, they came into an open glade ringed with palmettos, and saw three great boars charging toward them in strung-out single file.

Coray put his gelding straight at the first hog, a mottled red one, and Hatfield followed, though unable to do any shooting because Mort was directly in his line of fire. The red boar fell headlong, squealing and rooting the mud as Coray's Colt flared down at him. Mort swerved to intercept the second black hog, which was veering off to the left. Horror froze Hatfield in the leather then, as he saw Coray's bay skid and slip in the muck right in front of the onrushing boar which was slithering around broadside!

Coray's gun clicked empty, but Hatfield's field of fire was still blocked off by the floundering bay. The black boar streaked in under the horse's belly, saber-like tusks slashing and ripping and disemboweling the bay. Rearing and trumpeting in agony the horse fell, kicking and threshing in the brush. Coray was flung clear in a jarring sprawl, showered with blood from the gutted bay.

The black hog wheeled and poised to charge back at the fallen man. The third boar, a spotted giant, had halted uncertainly beyond Coray and the dying horse.

Driving in on Goldy, Jim Hatfield hammered shots from his left-hand gun into the black brute as it catapulted at Mort Coray, who was still down, dazed and helpless. Every slug went home, but the boar roared onward, carrying all that lead as if it were nothing. Barely ten feet from the stunned, scrabbling Coray, the hog finally pitched into a sliding fall that ended with its bloodied tusks almost brushing Coray's body. Then the spotted boar was coming in a headlong rush. And Hatfield was caught with both guns empty!

Goldy had pulled up when the black hog went down. Hatfield sheathed the smoking .45 and yanked his hunting knife as the spotted beast bore down on Mort Coray who was struggling to his knees at last. But Coray's guns had been spent, too.

There was just one long daring chance left. Hatfield threw the sorrel forward past Coray and the dead bay, head-on toward that maddened black-and-white monster with the enormous gleaming tusks, glimpsing the glimmer of Coray's blond head as they swept by.

THE golden stallion raced in without fear or hesitation. At the final split-second, Hatfield kneed Goldy slightly to the left and leaned far and low from the

saddle on the right, knife gripped in his big right hand. At close range the frothing, snorting boar was a hideous sight, and a hooked tusk nearly caught Hatfield's arm as he struck at the back of the hog's neck. The blade went in clean and deep, and was wrenched violently from Hatfield's grasp, almost tugging him along with it.

The sorrel was already spinning in a swift, tight turn when Jim Hatfield straightened himself in the sweated leather. The spotted boar was still hurtling at the kneeling Coray, the knife in its neck, and for an awful instant Hatfield feared he had failed. Coray would die horribly under those razor tusks! Then the hog was faltering, slowing and breaking down, to topple at last within touching distance of Mort Coray.

The relief and reaction were so great that Hatfield felt faint and giddy in the saddle, as he cantered back toward Coray.

Stepping down between the two dead boars, Hatfield raised Coray to his feet and held a canteen to his pale, numb lips. They were standing there awed and wordless, arms about one another, when the other riders galloped up and surrounded them. The scene had been witnessed, and there was deep, reverent respect in the glances laid upon Jim Hatfield.

Even Rod Furlong appeared to be impressed. But old Iron Mike Donovan, thankful as he was that Mort Coray had been saved, continued to eye Hatfield with dislike and suspicion and something akin to jealousy.

The hunt over, Coray threw his gear on one of the spare horses and started the homeward ride with Hatfield, leaving the others to render and butcher the dead pigs. It had been a good kill. There would be lard and pork aplenty in the homes of the Sabine. And the near-tragedy had brought Hatfield and Coray closer together than ever.

"I hope you'll change your mind about leaving tomorrow, Jim," said Mort Coray.

"I've got to be drifting along, Mort, as much as I hate to leave."

"Well, any time you come back this way, you've got a home on the Crown. Welcome to stay as long as you like, Jim."

"I sure appreciate that. I'll probably ride this way again some time."

"Don't let it wait too long."

"Try not to, that's for certain."

Back at the Crown, after Iris heard how Hatfield had saved her brother's life, she gazed at the Ranger with such sheer adoration that his determination to pull out in the morning was redoubled in spite of his liking for Mort, and all the protests and objections the Corays might raise.

Hatfield had a job of work to do, and he was at least four days behind schedule.

So morning found him following old cattle trails in a southwesterly course toward Bayou Lafitte and the Big Thicket, leaving behind him in the colonnaded manor house of Crown a sad-eyed man and a weeping girl.

"Some time, Goldy, we're going to have to light somewhere long enough to fall in love with some nice girl," he told the big, easy-gaited sorrel. "When that time comes I reckon you'll be out to pasture and I'll be riding a desk chair instead of this saddle. The way we travel and skyhoot around now, it wouldn't be fair to the girl or us either, Goldy. Texas is a mighty big state."

He wondered if Bouchard and Edley were still on the coast, or if they had started working upriver through Sabine Pass and past Lake Sabine. He hoped they wouldn't attempt to penetrate Congo Bog on their own, even though Red Bouchard was a wizard in the woods and brush.

The country was sparsely wooded with salt cedars and cottonwoods, cypress and pecan and palmetto, and here and there in drier areas Hatfield saw fringes of the more familiar catclaw and mesquite. The landscape shifted from salt-grass prairies to swamps and bayous, past wide marshes of canebrake that clashed like swords in the breeze.

IN THE distance, Hatfield saw lonely ranches and farms and homesteads, but he encountered no other riders. Oc-

casionally he had the feeling of being watched from cover, but even with his field-glasses he couldn't spot any furtive observers in the brush.

Natchez Dupree and his crew would like to pick him up in this wilderness, without a doubt. It seemed strange that those known desperadoes were not suspected of being involved in the raiding and rustling that had broken out in the Sabine, but Mort Coray wouldn't have driven them out of Copper Bluffs if he'd thought them guilty of the depredations.

For that matter, the Ranger supposed, the Dupree gang wouldn't have appeared openly in town if they had been engaged in terrorizing the countryside. Even a bold ruffian like Natchez Dupree wouldn't be that rash and brazen.

Hatfield considered the possibility that some of the supposedly honest ranchers were responsible for those raids. Iron Mike Donovan looked ruthless enough for almost anything. If Donovan were guilty, that would account for his hatred of strangers. He might have been suspicious that Hatfield was some kind of lawman. There were outlaws with an uncanny ability for identifying law officers, through any disguise or subterfuge.

Iron Mike Donovan was certainly a prospect, but Hatfield was still inclined to believe that the Gulf pirates were in some manner implicated in these land attacks, too.

Around mid-day the trail dipped down to a ford in a stream that ran between high, wooded banks. Hatfield approached this crossing with some apprehension. He had seen nothing but drifting cattle all morning, yet the sense of being under surveillance had persisted, and now he felt the warning tautness of his scalp and a chill flicker along his spine.

Reining up, he contemplated taking a roundabout route, but decided against it because he had wasted too much time already. Bouchard and Edley might be endangered because of his tardiness. If there were other horses nearby, Goldy would give him warning.

The sorrel scented the air without avail, and Hatfield put him down the grade through the shady cut and into the creek. The ford lay across sand and gravel bars, with deeper water on either side.

Halfway across, Hatfield felt the close scorching suction of lead as gunshots flamed out from the steep, thicketed bank ahead. He threw Goldy from the shoals to the downstream depths and slipped from saddle as they went under, swimming with the current beneath the surface. The sorrel emerged on top, swimming strongly, but the bushwhackers held their fire and watched for the Ranger to reappear.

Once more Goldy's life was spared because every man who saw him wanted to own the magnificent stallion.

CHAPTER IV

Ambush

WHEN Hatfield finally surfaced, with lungs and head on the verge of bursting, the northern shore was before him where the creek bent sharply southward. Stroking hard, then scrambling on hands and knees, he crawled out, dripping. He rolled over into the shelter of a huge log on the shoreline, with bullets churning the water and chewing up dirt and wood all around him.

Stretched there, sobbing for breath in the lee of that windfall, Hatfield saw Goldy clamber ashore a short distance below and trot into the trees. Jim Hatfield was alive, and lucky to be so, but he was pinned down tight on the shelving river bank, as helpless as a newborn baby.

There was no other cover within reach of the log. Nothing to do but lie flattened out there, with shots chunking into the wood or kicking dirt and pebbles just beyond him, and try to regain his breath, slow his heartbeat to normal, and let the noonday sun dry his guns and clothing. He figured there were four or five rifles at work on the south embankment—

Natchez Dupree and his bunch, no doubt —and they'd be fanning out on either flank to bring his position into view and cut him to pieces with a murderous crossfire.

Sixguns weren't of much use against rifles, even if he could have used them, and his Winchester was in the saddleboot on the sorrel. Hatfield couldn't reach Goldy any more than he could attain the deeper shelter of woods and boulders in the rising background. He couldn't make a move without getting his fool head blown off. He was on the griddle for fair, and in a few minutes he'd be exposed to angling fire from both sides. The timber wasn't long enough to protect him against that.

Leaving his guns out in the sun, Hatfield drew his knife and began digging into the hard-packed gravel and sand beneath him. If he could hack out a shallow trench behind the log, it might prolong his life for a few minutes, at least. Already the enemy shots were slashing in from widening arcs, eating ever nearer to his prone form and hampering his digging.

Hatfield was somewhat surprised that Natchez Dupree had taken this means of getting him. He'd rather expected Dupree would be looking forward to facing him in a fair stand-up fight. But apparently he had given the gunman too much credit. Should have expected a yellow streak in anyone who would maltreat a one-legged cripple.

This whole affair had started badly and was getting worse as it went along. Well, a premature and unhappy ending was in sight now, at any rate. Hatfield supposed it was high time his luck ran out. A man can survive only so many close calls, regardless of his skill and courage, and Hatfield had more than filled his quota a long way back.

The angled shots were whipping closer, flicking his clothes and searing his skin now. Hatfield sheathed the knife and picked up his sun-dried Colts. He'd take a few cracks at them before they got him, even though it was futile.

The bullets ceased tearing the log and earth on either side of him, although the guns were still booming. Another rifle had started up somewhere beyond the opposite ridge, and the ambushers had switched their fire to that direction. Someone had come up to pry the snipers off the Ranger's neck! Maybe Bouchard and Edley, though he doubted that they could have progressed this far north from the mouth of the Sabine. Whoever it might be was more than welcome.

Waiting a few minutes more, Hatfield gathered himself and sprang up into a crouching, weaving run inland, reaching the timbered slope with only one rifle searching his way and spraying him with sand and stone splinters. Well in cover he whistled shrilly, and Goldy soon came, picking his way daintily through the brush and boulders.

Hauling his carbine from the boot, Hatfield left Goldy in shelter and sought a vantage point, from which he started laying his fire upon the scattered riflemen on the wooded southern heights.

It was all over by the time Hatfield had emptied his Winchester. There was no return fire. The bushwhackers were on the run, pursued by the shots of that unknown sharpshooter who must have winged one or two of them to cause such a precipitous retreat.

AFTER the gunfire died away, Hatfield mounted the sorrel and rode up the river bank to the ford. He crossed quickly. In the shaded defile on the other side a strange buckskin-clad rider sat waiting on a gotch-eared dun pony. A little old man, gray of hair and mustache, with eyes of intense black under shaggy gray brows, chewing his tobacco and watching Hatfield with impassive calm.

"I sure want to thank you," Hatfield said.

"No need to, son. Purely a pleasure on my part. Never did like drygulchers, *them* buzzards in particular."

"Natchez Dupree's bunch?"

"You win the seegar, son. It was them all right. Reckon I creased a couple of

'em, but my poor old eyes are sure failing bad. Should've put two or three of 'em down for keeps. Time was when I would've had all five of 'em laid away. But the years take their toll, son. Old Bark Otis ain't the man he used to be, not whatever."

"Still plenty of man for my money," Hatfield said, smiling and reaching out to shake hands. "I'm Jim Harter, and I'm much obliged. They had me nailed down tight over there."

Bark Otis shook hands gravely. "Riding south, son? Might as well trek along with me. Got a little old shack down in the Thicket. Stay the night, if you want. Don't get much company, not of the kind I'd ask in."

"Maybe you're taking a long chance on me."

Bark Otis snorted softly and spat. "My eyes ain't that far gone, I can't size up a man—and a horse. You'll do to ride the river with, son."

They took the southward trail together, riding in long, easy silences, or talking when the mood was on the veteran brush-popper.

"More rustlin' last night, I hear," Bark Otis offered once. "Understand old Iron Mike Donovan lost quite a herd."

"You figure Dupree and his boys in on that?"

"*I* do. But nobody else seems to, for some unholy reason. Course they're in on it. But there's somebody a sight bigger and smarter behind 'em."

"Where do they run all that stolen stock?"

"Folks think it goes into the Big Thicket, but it don't. The tracks head in there, sure, but the cattle ain't held there. They're drove farther south, son, but I couldn't say where."

"You ever been into Congo Bog, Bark?" inquired Hatfield.

"Sure, I been in. I been hoorawing them swamps and jungles all my born days, boy."

"You think it's true that Jean Lafitte, the old pirate, had a place in the Bog?"

"Gospel true, son," said Bark Otis, surprisingly. "I know 'cause I saw it. And speaking of pirates, there's some funny stories going around lately. About some crazy sailorman down on the coast who claims to be a grandson of Jean Lafitte. Even calls himself Jean Lafitte the Third. Crazier'n a horned hootowl, I reckon."

Hatfield accepted this in silence, thinking, maybe not so crazy, at that. Maybe this Jean Lafitte, Third, whoever he really may be, is the pirate leader who's preying on Gulf vessels. And perhaps they're using the old pirate hideout in Congo Bog once more. Couldn't get their boat up there, of course, but they could anchor in Lake Sabine or even higher upstream, while the men themselves hid out in the Bog.

"Tell you something else about the Congo, son," Bark Otis went on. "You've heard of them Kronk Injuns that used to live in the Bog? Well, there's still some of 'em left in there! People think the tribe died out, but I know different. I ain't saying they're still cannibals, but I know they're still living in there. And it could be them that's raiding the Sabine ranches. The real bloody, burning-out raids, I mean."

"Could be, I reckon," agreed Hatfield, wondering how much of the old-timer's talk he could credit. Perhaps it was all nonsense, but he estimated there was some truth in it. "Bark," he asked suddenly, "would you take me into the Bog?"

"It ain't safe, son."

"I'll risk it, Bark."

BARK OTIS insisted, "It ain't worth it. Nothing in there but Injuns and crocodiles and 'gators and snakes and quicksand, all of 'em spelling sudden death."

Hatfield sighed wistfully. "Always wanted to see what it was like in Congo Bog."

"Like to accommodate you, son. But to tell the truth, I'm getting a mite too old to traipse in there myself. The only safe trails—if you can call any of 'em safe—are hard to find out and foller. And my memory for things ain't what it was once."

The Big Thicket, as Hatfield knew, was dense forest and jungle rather than swamp and marshland. He had been in the Thicket once, when he'd been on the track of Juan Cartinas and his band of smugglers. Pines and hardwoods of every species grew there in vast profusion, laced with vines and creepers, undergrown with colorful shrubs, rare ferns, and all varieties of orchids. Streams, ponds and potholes were rimmed with iris and wild flags, hyacinths, lilies and massed palmettos.

A wilderness of weird, lush, overripe beauty, lying in deep perpetual shadow. A refuge for trappers and hunters and fugitives from justice. A land of ancient fantastic legends, where men vanished as they did in Congo Bog.

Bark Otis's home—a log cabin and lean-to shed—was hidden in a tangled thicket, with a spring bubbling nearby. They reached it in late afternoon, unsaddling and caring for their horses, stabling them in the shed where the old man had grain and oats. The interior of the cabin was surprisingly neat and clean.

After washing up, Bark Otis set about preparing supper from his plentiful provisions, and Jim Hatfield settled down in thoughtful comfort. Maybe the fortunes of this mission were changing for the better. Bark Otis was like a human key to Congo Bog and Jean Lafitte's old sanctuary. Somehow Hatfield had to prevail upon the veteran woodsman to guide him into the Bog.

But the old man remained obdurate throughout the good meal, the dishwashing, and the long lazy evening.

"Son," he said, "you claim I saved your life today. If so, it'd be plumb damn foolish to take you in there and get you killed tomorrow."

CHAPTER V

Captives of the Congo

ON THE Gulf coast at the mouth of the Sabine River, Red Bouchard and Fox Edley had seen no sign of the pirates, learned nothing of their operations beyond the old rumor that the Ghost Ship did cruise up the Sabine. And the new one that a man who called himself Jean Lafitte III, and claimed to be a direct descendant of the old buccaneer, was in command of this new corsair crew.

"Reckon we better push along upstream, Fox," said Red Bouchard, stroking the fiery beard that he now wore short and cleanly trimmed. "If we loll around down here much longer that Hatfield will have the whole bunch wrapped up to drop in our laps and give us the horse laugh."

"I been ready to move for days," drawled the lean, wiry, bowlegged Fox Edley, a malicious grin on his sharp features. "But being a Ranger has slowed you down considerable, Red. Instead of acting, you try to think things out, and that don't come natural to a jughead like you."

"One of us has to use some brains, and you sure can't," Bouchard told him caustically. "In the Rangers you got to be careful and thorough. You can't just grab your guns and go in blind and bullheaded, the way you half-baked gunnies are used to doing."

Fox Edley laughed. "You was a hermit too long, Red Bush. The ways of the civilized world are beyond you."

Bouchard snorted. "You was a bandit too long, Fox, to be worth a single solitary damn on this side of the law."

"Now you're getting unkind and personal," protested Edley. "And I ain't even mentioned that beard of yours all week."

"What could you do except to praise it?"

"I can think of a few things," Edley said drily.

Camp broken and their gear aboard, they started riding up the river toward Sabine Pass, their backs turned on the sandy dunes and the vast blue expanse of the Gulf of Mexico. The stream here was navigable for craft of considerable tonnage, and Bouchard wondered how far upstream it would be that way. In Lafitte's day the privateers had cruised way

up into Congo Bog, according to the story, but there was less water now than there had been a half-century ago.

In Sabine Pass they came upon the recent traces of large herds of cattle, and Bouchard mused aloud, "What they driving all them critters way down here for? They wasn't shipping 'em out from the coast."

"Probably brought 'em down for a bath," drawled Edley, drawing a look of contempt from Bouchard's bright blue eyes.

Side canyons opened off in either wall of the Pass, and into these the tracks debouched here and there.

"Looks like rustling to me," Bouchard declared. "They run 'em off from the upper Sabine ranches, and hide 'em out in these back pockets and valleys. Maybe we ought to investigate, Fox."

"We ain't after rustlers—we're hunting for pirates," Edley reminded him. "A Ranger's supposed to follow instructions."

"Could be a hook-up between the rustling and pirating."

Edley laughed scoffingly. "Whoever heard of pirates running cattle?"

"Whoever heard of pirates in this day and age anyway?" growled Red Bouchard.

They left the Pass and skirted Lake Sabine, a long widened and deepened part of the river with an irregular wooded shoreline. Scanning the sweep of water with its innumerable coves and bays, Bouchard murmured:

"They could moor their ship here and nobody'd ever find it."

"We could swim around the lake and look for it," Fox Edley suggested, with mock gravity.

"Go ahead," Bouchard said scornfully. "You ain't no help on dry land, and that's a fact."

"I would, only I can't bear to leave you, Red," said Edley. "And besides, I had my monthly bath down on the coast."

"You're so funny I could bust out crying," Bouchard muttered in disgust. "I don't wonder that Hatfield likes to travel alone."

"Why, Red Bush!" exclaimed Edley. "You know you'd be lost without this old Fox."

"Yeah, I probably would," Bouchard grumbled. "Since I quit being a hermit I've lost what little sense I did have."

NORTH of the lake, the Sabine ran on the east and the tropical swamplands of Congo Bog loomed dark and eerie in the west. They followed the trail up the river, knowing better than to attempt an invasion of the Bog at this stage of the game. Their primary objective at this point was to reach Jim Hatfield, and they might accomplish this before nightfall, if nothing unforseen arose. By their rather sketchy prearranged time-table, the Lone Wolf should be well on his way downstream by now.

"That Hatfield is some hombre," Fox Edley said seriously, as they discussed the potential meeting.

"They broke the mold after they made him," Red Bouchard agreed. "I've seen 'em in all the trail towns—Abilene, Newton, Ellsworth, Wichita, Hays, and Dodge. I've seen 'em from the Pecos to the Platte. And I never saw the equal of Jim Hatfield. I never expect to."

It was a strange exotic landscape that they traversed now, with the rank stench of the Bog always in their nostrils, the scent of swamp flowers mixed with the putrescent smell of bayou mud. Cypress swamps stretched on either hand, bindweed and woodbine and Virginia creeper smothering the post oaks and matting the earth. Huisache flared golden in the thickets, and buffalo clover rippled on windswept ridges.

Crescent-shaped lakes simmered greenly, hyacinth-massed ox-bows left from old overflows of the river. Now and then they saw ridged shell beaches, remnants from ancient times when the ocean covered this area, known locally as *chenieres*.

"Don't look much like Texas to me," grumbled Red Bouchard, spitting tobacco juice into a clump of agrito.

"It ain't," Fox Edley said, munching his own chew. "It's a nightmare, Red. I can believe in them pirates when I see

country like his."

Bouchard glanced at the Sabine on his right. "It ain't deep enough here for a boat of any size, Fox. I got an idea they anchor down in one of them coves in Lake Sabine."

"Seems likely," admitted Edley. "The schooner'd be safe enough tucked away there. Except for that cattle sign we haven't seen a whisper of life along this trail."

"And when we do, it most likely won't make us happy," Bouchard remarked gloomily. "There's something about this stinkin' mucky country that gets me down real low."

"So long as you keep them red whiskers out of the mire you're all right," Fox Edley chortled. "When that beard starts dragging we'll both cash in our chips."

Red Bouchard couldn't have been more prophetic than in his last statement. They were in a potholed basin, floored with pond lilies and surrounded by moss-veiled cypresses and heavy-fronded palmettos when the challenge came, and brought them reining up short. The woods around them were suddenly bristling with rifle barrels.

Edley and Bouchard, checking an initial impulse to draw and fight it out, exchanged bitter glances and shrugged. No sense in committing suicide. Laying reins on saddle-horns, they elevated their hands in accordance with the harsh command.

"We're a big success, Red," said Edley. "Jim'll be right proud of us."

"Yeah, I'm going to resign and go back to living alone in the hills where I belong, Fox," muttered Bouchard.

"It maybe won't be necessary," Edley said drily. "These jaspers might have different ideas for our immediate futures—if any."

The ring of riflemen was closing in now, and the two Rangers saw at once that they had overtaken the pirates, even though it wasn't to their own advantage. Some of the men wore turbans and carried cutlasses, along with the pistols and rifles. The leader, a thin, vulture-faced man with madness shining in his squinted eyes, actually had large golden rings suspended from his prominent ears.

A TALL TEXAS TALE

BIG BUG

CHARLIE GOODNIGHT could not sit still any longer. The visitor from California had a large mouth which he flapped constantly, as he told how everything in the Golden State was bigger and better and wider and higher than anything to be found anywhere else in the world. Charlie made a couple of brave attempts to get in some licks for his beloved Texas, but the Californian just had too much wind for him.

So Charlie finally rose from the front stoop of the bunkhouse and strolled irritably away into the night. As he moved across the smooth, hard-packed surface of the yard he stumbled over an object which he soon discovered to be a big snapping turtle, and an idea suddenly occurred to him.

Picking up the turtle with care, he carried him quietly in the back door of the bunkhouse and deposited him between the blankets of the Californian's bed. Then he went out through the back door and returned by a roundabout route to the front stoop, where it was shortly decided that the time had come to hit the hay.

When the visitor from California shucked off his boots and rolled between his blankets, he immediately let out a loud beller and leaped from the bed with the snapping turtle firmly attached to one of his toes.

"What the—!" he yelped. "What'n'ell's that!"

Charlie Goodnight looked up from where he sat on the edge of his bunk calmly rolling a cigarette. "That, my friend, is just a little old Texas bed-bug. You got any bigger in California?"

"Disarm them," he ordered, with a shark-tooth grimace.

Bouchard and Edley sat still with an effort, while their gunbelts were stripped off and their rifles yanked from the scabbards.

"I am Jean Lafitte the Third," said the chief, with dignity and grandeur.

"Howdy," murmured Fox Edley. "Me and Jim Bowie met your grandpappy once down in Galvez-Town."

"What's that?" barked the leader. "Get down and come here!"

THEY swung down and stood before him, their horses held by some of the others. Like themselves, Lafitte was not a large man, but he had an air of immense authority and dominance.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Nobody much," Bouchard said. "Just a couple of riders."

"What are you doing in this country?"

"Just riding through."

"You lie!" Jean Lafitte III declared. "You are Texas Rangers."

Edley laughed. "You think they'd hire anybody as dumb as us?"

"A funny fellow," Lafitte said. "We'll see how much you laugh under torture in the Bog. How many funny answers you give when the pain is screaming through your body. When you are begging us to kill you."

"What do you want of us?" Bouchard asked.

"A little amusement, if nothing else. It gets dull in the swamp."

"We ain't bothering anybody," Bouchard protested.

Jean Lafitte laughed, with full exposure of his pointed fangs. "You chose a bad road to ride, my friend. The last two we caught we fed to the alligators and crocodiles. A leg, an arm at a time."

"You wouldn't do that to an old friend of your granddaddy's?" drawled Fox Edley.

Jean Lafitte III lashed out suddenly and struck Edley across the nose and mouth, the blood spurting at once. Edley leaped at him, swinging savagely, but Lafitte dodged away and a burly pirate landed on Fox's back, clamping his arms behind him. Lafitte stepped forward then and slugged at Edley's face with deliberate brutal force.

That was too much for Red Bouchard. He hurled himself at the corsair captain, but a gun-barrel sliced across his fiery head and knocked him to his knees. Bouchard was sagging there, half-senseless, when another man grasped his beard, jerked his head far back, and slashed a steel barrel into his unprotected face. Bouchard went down in a gush of crimson.

Lafitte had beaten the helpless Edley almost unconscious by this time. Signaling Edley's captor to release his arms, Lafitte measured the tottering figure and struck with unleashed ferocity at the ruined face. Fox Edley fell backward, rolled over, and was still in the ferns.

Jean Lafitte III, smiling with satisfaction, called in the horse holders with their mounts, and said, "Tie them in the saddle and put a rope on their necks, Chopper. We'll be getting along into Congo Bog."

"You think they're lawmen, Captain?" asked Chopper, the brawny pirate who had pinioned Edley's arms.

"I don't know," Lafitte said. "They could be. We can't afford to run any risks. Lawmen or not, we'll have some sport with them in the Bog. It'll help pass the time until we sail again."

CHAPTER VI

A Noose and a Limb

EATING breakfast in Bark Otis's cabin, Jim Hatfield was still unable to persuade the old man to lead him into Congo Bog. It was irksome, but Hatfield couldn't be too demanding, after Otis had saved his life and offered him the hospitality of his rude but comfortable wilderness home.

"If you don't find what you're looking for," said Otis, "mosey back this way one

of these days, and maybe I'll make one more trip into the Bog for you."

"What do you think I'm looking for, Bark?" inquired Hatfield.

"Why, nothing, except a passage into Congo Bog," said Bark Otis, with bland innocence.

Liking and trusting this old fellow, Hatfield decided to risk his hole card.

"Would it help any if you knew I was a Ranger?"

A slow smile spread under the gray mustache. "Maybe I've knowed that right along, son. Been around a long while, and I ain't spent all my time in the Thicket and Bog. Heard tell of a big Ranger they called the Lone Wolf, riding a big yeller sorrel hoss."

"You think anybody else in the Sabine has spotted me?"

"Could be why Natchez and his boys was kind of anxious to put you under," Bark Otis said.

"Could be why Iron Mike Donovan's so hostile, too?"

"Possible, son," granted the old-timer. "Though Mike claims to be losing more steers than anybody else."

"They cover up that way lots of times," Jim Hatfield said.

"Sure they do. I ain't arguing a case for Iron Mike. He's ornery enough to do 'most anything, but I always figured him fairly honest."

"Well, Bark, if you won't take me into the Bog, I've got to be on my way alone," Hatfield said. "I want you to know I'm grateful for everything."

"Nothing at all," said Bark Otis. "You go ahead, son. And if you can't cut the mustard by yourself, come on back here and see me. I ought to be good for one more sashay into them swamps."

"Fair enough, Bark," said Hatfield, retesting his double cinches and lashed gear, and stepping easily into the saddle on the high sorrel.

"Watch out they don't try to take you for a rustler, son," Bark Otis said, grinning.

"That's all I need, Bark," said Hatfield. Saluting, he swung away on the splendid golden stallion, with Bark Otis looking after him in admiration.

To skirt the Big Thicket and pass the southern end of Bayou Lafitte, Hatfield headed south toward the steaming wastelands of Congo Bog. He hadn't gone too far when he came upon the marks of a recent cattle drive, pointing into the Thicket, and he picked up the trail out of curiosity. As Otis had intimated, the tracks penetrated the Thicket only shallowly before slanting off eastward toward the Sabine.

The flapping of buzzards about a pecan grove pulled Hatfield in that direction. Coming in under the trees he saw that the object of the carrion birds' interest was a dead cow in the brambles. The vultures took wing at his approach, and Hatfield stepped down and dropped Goldy's reins to inspect the carcass. It bore Iron Mike Donovan's Stirrup brand, he observed at once, and had been shot and left there, probably because it was sick and lagging.

A premonition of danger brought Hatfield up and around—too late—and then he knew precisely why the cow had been killed and abandoned in that lonely spot. For moving in on him from the near woods was Iron Mike Donovan himself, with a half-dozen riders at his back, and all of them with guns in their hands.

It would be foolish to reach for his Colts, Hatfield realized. He might get one or two of them, but he'd be dying when he did it.

THE trap had been sprung and he had been caught, and he felt certain now that Donovan was the outlaw who had been ravishing the river country. Even Hatfield's hidden Ranger badge wouldn't save him in this case. In fact, it would only hasten his death and the disappearance of his body.

"So it's as I suspected from the start," said Iron Mike Donovan, squat and ugly in the saddle, his beaked nose and massive jaws jutting. "You are one of 'em—maybe the big mogul of 'em. After we string you up, mister, the rustling will

probably stop."

"You're crazy, man," Hatfield said. "This critter's been dead over twenty-four hours."

"So what? So you're checking the trail, to see how many your boys lost on the way."

"That's likely!" Hatfield said. "You don't even believe that yourself, Donovan."

"No matter—and no argument. Drop your guns, Harter—or whatever your name is."

"This is murder!"

Iron Mike Donovan laughed. "We call it justice on the range."

"Mort Coray won't call it that," Hatfield said.

"We caught you red-handed. Even Mort can't argue that off. Drop your belt."

Hatfield shook his high dark head. "Come and get it, if you want it."

"I'd shoot you down like a mad dog," Iron Mike Donovan said, "except that I want to see you kicking at the end of a rope.—Go get his guns, some of you men. And watch out he don't pull on you."

Three horsemen dismounted and moved warily toward Hatfield from different directions, keeping out of line of the other riders, snarling at the Ranger to get his hands up. Hatfield shook his head again.

There were seven of them with drawn guns, yet they weren't sure of themselves. Donovan's insistence on hanging Hatfield gave Jim a certain advantage. As a last resort he would flash his Ranger star, even though it got him nothing but a quick bullet in the brain.

"Don't shoot him, boys!" Donovan called. "I told you I want him dangling with a noose on his neck. He deserves to die slow."

A big buck-toothed man Hatfield heard called Magoon approached from the front, saying, "Unbuckle your belt, feller. You don't want to get all beat up before you swing."

"You do it," invited Hatfield, standing calm and indolent, big hands hanging idly at his sides. But his eyes had turned from sunny green to ice-cold gray.

Magoon stepped in and Hatfield struck him lightning-fast in the mouth, feeling some of those protruding teeth give as pain knifed through his knuckles. Magoon landed flat on his back in the weeds, blood gushing from his broken-toothed mouth.

A man Donovan called Whipple jumped at him from the side, but Hatfield pivoted smoothly and belted him left and right, driving him fifteen feet back against a pecan bole. From it he bounced and flopped full length on his face in a dusty fern bed.

The third Stirrup rider, Sammond, came in from the rear. Hatfield whirled to meet him. But Sammond's gun-barrel was already swishing down on the Ranger's black-hatted skull, bowing his dark head, bending his knees, and dropping him on all fours.

By the time Hatfield's brain cleared he had been unarmed and was being supported between two men under a tree, a rawhide riata knotted under his chin. The lariat, thrown up over a stout limb, was held by the still bleeding and cursing Magoon and Whipple. It was to be the worst kind of hanging, death by slow strangulation, his wrists bound behind his back.

"You're making an awful mistake here," Hatfield told Donovan.

The rancher was watching the spectacle from horseback, a complacent smile on his ugly heavy-boned features, hat pushed back on his large bald head.

"You made the mistakes, mister," said Iron Mike Donovan. "You ready to talk now?—All right, boys, give him a taste of it."

MAGOON and Whipple hauled on the rope until Hatfield's boots were a foot off the ground, the noose cutting into his throat, choking off air and blood. When they let him down, Hatfield stumbled to his knees, face purpled and head bursting, lungs pumping fire. He got up awkwardly, and panted:

"You know I'm no rustler, Donovan! Maybe you know I'm a—"

"Hoist him again, boys!" broke in Iron

Mike, and once more the rawhide tightened wickedly on Hatfield's neck as he was lifted off the earth. "Snub it and let him swing," Iron Mike ordered callously.

Hatfield's vision was blurred and failing, eyes bulging from his congested face when he glimpsed more riders lining into the pecan grove, with Morton Coray racing at the point of the column. Once more he was lowered abruptly, tumbling with his face in the bindweed this time.

From a long way off Coray's voice sounded furiously, "What the hell's going on here? Cut him loose, you fools, before I start blasting! What do you think you're doing, Mike? Have you lost your mind entirely, man?"

"He's a rustler, like I told you, Mort," said Donovan, but his tone suddenly lacked authority and conviction. "We caught him over that dead cow, and it wears the Stirrup iron."

"That doesn't mean a damn thing and you know it!" Coray said. "Any passing rider will stop and look at a dead beef. By God, Mike, if you'd hung that man, I'd hunt you down and kill you and every last one of your outfit!"

Jim Hatfield, hands freed and the noose removed from his throat, climbed slowly to his feet and buckled on the gunbelt that Sammond handed back to him without a word. Mort Coray swung down and stood anxiously before him.

"You all right, Jim? If they've hurt you they'll answer to me for it, the stupid, blundering idiots!"

"I'm—all right—Mort," said Hatfield, still laboring for breath, and rubbing gently at his neck.

"If you want to smash any of 'em, go right ahead, Jim," said Coray grimly. "I'll keep the pack off while you work on them."

"Don't go too far, Mort," warned Iron Mike Donovan.

"You're the one that went too far, Mike," said Coray, in a cold, seething fury. "You ever cross me again and it'll be the last time. I'll wipe you out and pull the Stirrup down over your dead bodies! Take your men and get out now! I'm sick of looking at you. Go on, get moving!"

Iron Mike didn't like it, but he took it. He was too old, too far over the hill, to stand up against a young fighting man like Mort Coray. He had always worshiped Mort, for another thing, and still did, in spite of this public dressing down in front of his own and the Crown riders.

Motioning his men into the saddle, Iron Mike Donovan wheeled his mount and led them away out of the trees.

Coray turned back to Hatfield. "I'm mighty sorry this had to happen, Jim. Mike's getting too old and miserable to think straight, I guess. He lost a big bunch of cattle again the other night, and, it's driving him crazy, it looks like."

"It's all right, Mort," said Hatfield. "No real harm done—except to my pride and dignity. And you're still one up on me in this life-saving business."

Coray smiled and relaxed a bit. "I'm just thankful we got here in time, Jim. Old Mike'll be glad, too, when he simmers down and realizes what he almost did here."

"A lot of people in the Sabine seem to want me dead," Hatfield said, with a rueful grin. "Yesterday Natchez Dupree and his boys jumped me. I was in a bad spot until Bark Otis came along and chased them off with some fast and fancy shooting."

"Good old Bark Otis," said Coray. "A great old brushpopper."

"Don't you think Natchez's crew is in with the rustlers?"

"I suppose they are, Jim. I've been holding off waiting for them to lead us to the big ones, but I reckon it's time to go after Natchez and his boys now. We lost a few head the other night, too. Not as many as Mike lost, but enough to hurt— You want to help us look for them?"

"No, Mort, I'd better be drifting along my own way."

"You want company, Jim?" asked Coray.

HATFIELD smiled wryly. "No, thanks, Mort. It's about time I started taking care of myself in this coun-

try. All I've done so far is get in one tight after another, and wait for somebody like you or Bark to get me out of it— Almost got old Bark to guide me into Congo Bog, but couldn't quite convince him."

"You don't want to go into that sinkhole of a swamp, Jim," protested Coray. "Nothing in there but trouble and death."

"That's what Bark told me. But I've always been curious about the Bog— Well, Mort, I won't hold you up any longer."

"Don't try the Bog by yourself, Jim," cautioned Coray.

Hatfield laughed. "Don't worry, Mort. I'm not that curious. Be seeing you, Mort."

They shook hands and Coray said, "Don't forget you've always got a home waiting for you on the Crown, Jim."

"I'll remember. And always be grateful, Mort."

They parted, and Jim Hatfield went on to scout the fringes of Congo Bog for the remainder of the day, but finding nothing of much interest or worth. Late that afternoon he decided to return to Bark Otis's hut in the Big Thicket, and make one more appeal to the old-timer. Without an escort who knew the way, the Bog was absolutely impenetrable. A final earnest request might sway Otis over to the undertaking.

Hatfield retraced his way to the log cabin with some difficulty, but found it deserted in the early evening. Both the old man and his dun horse were missing. Reading sign in the fading light, Hatfield discovered that Bark had had several visitors since morning, and his stomach dropped with a chill, sinking sensation. Natchez Dupree might have recognized Otis yesterday, and come to take his revenge on the old woodsman.

Striding swiftly through the brush to the spring, Hatfield found Bark Otis huddled over an empty water pail, with three bullet-holes in his blood-blackened buckskin back, any one of which would have been fatal. He had been murdered for coming to the Ranger's rescue yesterday.

Hatfield carried the stiffening little body back to the shack, and got out a pick and shovel to dig the grave. When Bark Otis was buried, Hatfield brought water from the spring, washed up, and started supper in the lamplit cabin. It seemed desolate and lonely with Otis gone.

Hatfield's mission had taken on new point and incentive now, and his first objective was clearly defined for the initial time. In the morning he would get on the track of the killers, and stay on it until he had run them down and exacted full payment for the death of Bark Otis.

CHAPTER VII

Battle in the Bog

NEXT morning, early, Jim Hatfield was out on the trace, leaving old Bark Otis in his grave beside the log cabin. There had been three riders, one of them leading Otis's horse. Apparently wounds had prevented two of Natchez Dupree's men from participating in this murder.

The tracks led deeper into the Big Thicket, and Hatfield followed them with the skill of long training and experience. With all his talent, it was slow, hard work, for the outlaws had made some effort to obscure their trail.

Hatfield lost it time after time, in the churned-up mud of cattle runs, in shallow creeks and on hardpan rock. But always he picked it up again and pushed on, with slitted green eyes seeking out the smallest signs.

Later in the day, after leaving the Thicket, the tracks vanished in wide marshlands and narrow lagoons, in bayou muck and along flint-rock ridges. Hatfield hunted with infinite patience until he was back on the spoor again, pursuing it with keen, relentless vigilance and tireless energy.

In stretches where the trace was distinct, Goldy flattened out into long reaching strides to gain ground on the quarry. And Hatfield was all the time alert against any undue freshness in the sign, which

might indicate that the killers were preparing an ambush for possible pursuers.

At intervals there was little to go on, and Hatfield had to rely more or less on instinct and luck, and the minutest of signs. Horsehair in the brush, bent twigs and grass, abrasions on stone surfaces, frayed palmetto fronds, torn pond lily pads, faint shapeless prints in the mire, broken reeds and canes.

The terrain became more sunken and swampy, with the roots of cypresses submerged in reeking green pools, and parrots chattered shrilly from rank tropical vegetation. Some time in the afternoon Hatfield entered the upper margins of Congo Bog without being aware of it, until he saw the first shell beaches and islands, heard bull alligators roar in the distance, and saw herons and cranes scatter from the lagoons before the sinuous rush of saw-toothed crocodiles.

The trace, threading erratically on almost undiscernible spines of solid ground between bayous and ponds and pockets of quicksand, pointed ever deeper into the Bog, and was much fresher now. It looked as if the bandits were going to lead him to Jean Lafitte's swamp stronghold. Hatfield's hunch, linking the pirates and rustlers, must have been a sound one.

Goldy shied at the slithering of snakes through poisonous green grasses, and somewhere not too far ahead a horse neighed, but the sorrel did not answer. The Ranger drew his carbine at once.

Dismounting, he left Goldy high-and-dry in the shelter of one of the *cheniere* barrier beaches, studded with scrub oaks. Prowling carefully forward on foot, Hatfield loosened his Colts in the leather and moved from one patch of cover to another. The killers must be in camp nearby, probably on one of the shell islands, ancient enough to support brush and trees in the earth accumulated through the years.

One such formation rose ahead, covered with stunted timber, and from it came the whinny of a horse. Hatfield pressed forward to the bottom of the shalelike slope, and started his slow wary climb upward, the sharp edges of exposed shells biting into his palm and knees. He made scarcely any noise, yet it sounded terribly loud in his own ears. He gave thanks for the squawking parrots, the drumming, crying waterfowl, the splash and surge of crocodiles, and the roar of 'gators.

From the top rim Hatfield peered across the rough wooded surface of the island to a slight depression in which two horses were tethered and two men reclined in the shade of palmettos and dwarf oaks. The third outlaw must have gone ahead or branched off with the lead horse. It was still some distance to the center of Congo Bog, where the pirate refuge was supposed to be.

Hatfield recognized these two badmen—trim, cool Perley Bayles, and the tall, debonair Tod Hunter, two expert gunhawks. The murderers of Bark Otis! It must have been the two half-breeds, Swamp Eagle and Kronk, whom Otis had wounded that day at the ford.

Natchez Dupree himself had no doubt gone on to reconnoiter with the privateers. Hatfield realized he had better strike while the odds were only two to one, and the surprise element was in his favor.

CRAWLING over the rim, he hitched and writhed forward on elbows and knees, flattened out. Carrying the Winchester from tree to tree and from one shell mound to another, he utilized screens of undergrowth as he advanced. The afternoon sun burned hot on his back, the ground was scorching beneath him, and sweat poured from his strong-boned face and plastered his shirt to his broad, muscular shoulders. All about him was the stench of ancient drowned lands, steaming and smothered with fetid tropical plants, and the clamorous discord of primitive swamp noises.

Hatfield was squirming toward another palmetto when one of the horses whickered as if in alarmed warning. Bayles and Hunter came up, crouching, and scanning their back-trail, rifles in hand. Hat-

field froze motionless until he was sure they had sighted him. He was scrambling for a palmetto as their rifles came level and burst into livid flame, the bullets kicking dirt and shell fragments over him.

Prone behind the thick palmetto, Hatfield cut loose with his carbine, hitting the neat little Bayles with the third shot, driving him backward and down in a twisting sprawl. Tod Hunter's slugs were chewing wood close to the Ranger's cheek, tearing at his hatbrim. Hatfield switched his sights onto the elegant Louisiana gunsharp, lashing him into the shelter of a boulder.

Aiming, firing, and ducking back into cover, Jim Hatfield and Tod Hunter dueled it out until their rifles were spent, every shot searing close but not quite scoring, spraying one another with shell particles and dust, bark and stone splinters. Perley Bayles lay where he had fallen, clutching his carbine and stirring occasionally.

"What do you say, sucker?" called Tod Hunter, gay and reckless. "Out in the open with the sixes now?"

"Suits me all right!" Hatfield yelled back.

"Come on, then."

Hunter rose, drew his hand-guns, and stepped into the clear. Jim Hatfield stood up without the Winchester, flipping his twin Colts out and moving away from the palmetto. They paced toward one another in the dazzling sunshine, dappled with the ragged shade patterns of oak and palm. Hatfield wanted to wind it up before Natchez Dupree or somebody else threw into the game.

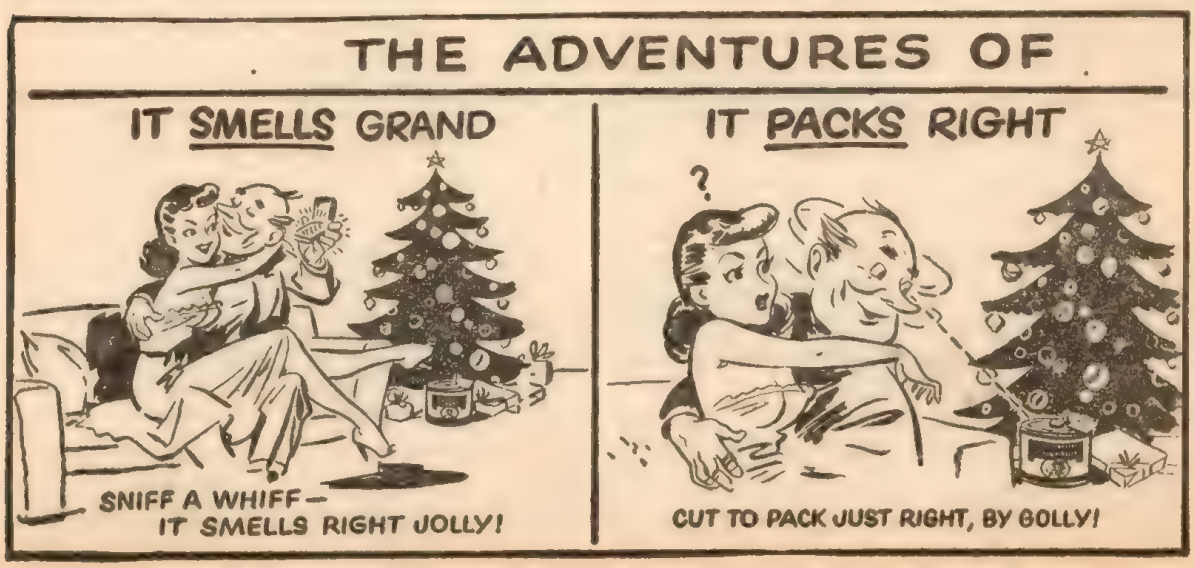
Tod Hunter fired first, and Hatfield felt the whip of lead as he lined and let go with his right-hand gun. Dust puffed from Hunter's green shirt, and he turned and sideslipped to one knee, but went on working both pistols, pallid fire lancing from them. But Hunter was hard hit, and his shots flew high or raked the beach in front of the Ranger.

Hatfield missed with his second try, but slammed the third and fourth home solidly, the .45s smashing Tod Hunter over backward. He stretched, kicked spasmodically, and was still on a gleaming white bed of shells.

Perley Bayles was up on his knees now, his rifle blaring loudly as he brought it to bear on the Lone Wolf. Hatfield turned both Colts loose on him, the recoils bouncing his big hands as the guns blazed left and right, left and right again. Riddled and coughing red, Bayles jerked back from the swift, slashing impacts, rolling over into a shapeless bundle of bloody rags, his face buried in the salt grass of that shallow depression.

Hatfield reloaded, smoky gray eyes on the two bodies, neither of them so much as twitching again.

"Well, that settles some of it, Bark," he



said softly, turning back to the palmetto to retrieve his Winchester. "The rest'll have to wait a bit." After all that shooting, it would be suicidal to try and go on into the Bog.

He slid down the shaly slope and strode back toward Goldy. They had to get out of here before darkness, or they'd end up in the quicksand or in some lagoon with the 'gators and crocodiles. The best he could do was try to store this much of the trail away in his memory.

Mounted on the sorrel, Hatfield started retracing his precarious path northward out of Congo Bog, feeling strangely alone now that two enemies were dead and he had no definite immediate objective to strive for. He resolved, once he was clear of the swamps, to head for the Sabine and strike downstream to meet Red Bouchard and Fox Edley—if it wasn't too late for them.

THERE was no question in his mind now that the Gulf pirates and the Sabine rustlers were inter-related. Say that Jean Lafitte III conducted the sea operations, and Natchez Dupree was in charge of the land marauders, who could be the master mind in back of the entire program? Neither the half-mad Lafitte nor a cheap tinhorn like Dupree was qualified.

From where Hatfield sat, everything pointed to Iron Mike Donovan. What else could have made Donovan so eager to string Jim Hatfield up? Donovan must have spotted him for a Ranger, and determined to get rid of him one way or another, as soon as possible.

And where did they drive the stolen herds? Hatfield pondered. Not into the Big Thicket, although they tried to simulate that destination; and obviously not into Congo Bog. They must run them down the river and across into Louisiana. Either that, or they hid the stock down toward the coast somewhere, possibly in one of those back valleys off Sabine Pass.

He'd have a look down that way, at any rate. And he hoped to find Red Bush and the Fox alive and well, some place between here and the mouth of the Sabine.

Goldy was picking his way along the crooked trail with unerring assurance, avoiding the soggy sinking spots, sticking to firm substantial footing. Hatfield thought for perhaps the thousandth time what it meant to a man to have a mount like the magnificent golden sorrel.

He wondered if there actually were Indians still inhabiting these watery wastelands. He was inclined to discount that part of old Bark Otis's report on Congo Bog. The Karankahuas were supposed to have become extinct years ago, dying out as the runaway slaves had died out after seeking sanctuary in the swamps. No, he believed the existence of Kronks

[*Turn page*]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET

A MERRY SMOKE—Sir Walter Raleigh!

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. THE LARGE SIZE CANISTER OF SIR WALTER RALEIGH—IN A BEAUTIFUL YULETIDE PACKAGE—MAKES THE PERFECT CHRISTMAS GIFT!

was a figment of the old man's imagination.

But he sure wished Bark Otis could have lived and taken him in to the Lafitte hideaway. And Bark would still be roaming the brush, if he hadn't intervened to save Hatfield's life. Well, two of the old man's killers had paid with their lives, and Hatfield was going to bring Natchez Dupree to account before this hand was played out.

He thought of the Corays and the Crown, with a slight wistfulness. Odd how that friendship had sprung up between Mort and himself, on such short acquaintance, and how they'd taken turns saving each other's lives. And Iris Coray, a sweet and painful memory, that he had better not dwell on. A man gave up a lot when he took Texas for his mistress. as well as his master, but he also gained a great deal in other respects.

It was a vast relief to leave Congo Bog behind in the late afternoon, but the evil musky smell of it stayed with Hatfield for some time as he rode eastward toward the Sabine River. He found an empty line shack before darkness closed in, and settled down there to make a cheerless supper from his saddle-bags and spend the night.

CHAPTER VIII

The Secret of Sabine Pass

DRIFTING down the Sabine Valley the following day, the river on the east and the gloomy expanse of Congo Bog in the west, Jim Hatfield was not surprised to discover the tracks of a large and increasing herd of cattle. The rustlers must have scattered their gather, then brought it back into a bunch as they drove southward.

While the ranchers wasted their time scouring the Big Thicket and environs, the prints of their lost stock lay plain and open to the south. Hatfield pushed forward on the sorrel, anxious to ascertain the destination of the beef, as well as to make contact with Bouchard and Edley.

In places the trail narrowed under a canopy of encroaching cypress, cottonwood and post oak, and an abrupt bend in one of these deep-shaded intervals brought Hatfield face to face with another tall rider. Both men reached for their holsters, but the other man froze halfway in recognition, and the realization that he was way behind on his draw.

The rider was Rod Furlong, the long, loose-jointed Crown foreman, anger and frustration twisting his hatchet-face and bobbing his rusty head. Hatfield was surprised to see him riding alone, and in the opposite direction from the stolen cattle.

"You're still nosing around this country, huh?" Furlong muttered sullenly, his blue eyes pale and icy.

"Any objections?" drawled Hatfield.

"Not so long as you keep going."

"And if I don't?"

"You'll die here." Rod Furlong clipped the words between his teeth.

Hatfield laughed easily. "I intend to keep going—but not from fear, Furlong. You don't look too happy, for a man who's found out where his rustled stock's being run."

"I didn't find much, mister. Except that they're being run across the river into Louisiana."

"Sure of that?"

"Is it any of your damn business?" Furlong demanded.

"Just from a friendly interest in the Crown," said Hatfield evenly. "Where's your crew, Furlong?"

"That's none of your business, either. Just keep on riding out of here and everybody'll be happy."

"The Corays weren't happy about my leaving," Hatfield said, with gentle malice.

Furlong swore furiously and snatched at his gun, rage and hate burning away all caution. But Hatfield threw Goldy in against the black horse and caught Furlong's gun-wrist in his big left hand, his right arm encircling the man's neck and locking in a steel grip under the chin.

Kneeing Goldy away then, Hatfield dragged Furlong from the saddle with a powerful wrench, and hurled him flying to earth, the gun spinning out of his hand as he landed flat on his back with jarring, breath-taking force.

Rod Furlong was groping for his left-hand weapon, when Jim Hatfield jumped down beside him and kicked the iron out of Furlong's fingers as he brought it clear.

"Get up!" Hatfield ordered, anger flaring through himself now.

Furlong shook his rust-colored head, still somewhat dazed, and panting for air.

Grasping the man by one arm, Hatfield heaved mightily and jerked him upright, with Furlong's free fist flailing at the Ranger's face and his knee driving at the groin. Thoroughly aroused by this, Hatfield's left hand streaked up to clamp Furlong's throat. His right hand started slashing that bony face, forehand and backhand, back and forth, the reddish head snapping and turning with every savage stroke. Blood streamed from Furlong's nose and mouth, fear and pain showing in the cold blue eyes.

Hatfield cocked his right and let it go in a full-armed swing then, and Furlong's head sprang far back from the sodden smash of the blow as Hatfield released his neck. Reeling backward Furlong fell hard on his shoulder-blades, legs settling and spraddled as all consciousness was driven out of him.

HATFIELD, breathing a trifle hard, stood looking down at the lanky senseless shape.

"Maybe that'll teach you not to go around talking fight talk you can't back up," he said to those deaf ears.

Wheeling away, Hatfield stepped into leather and loped along on his way south, while behind him the foreman's black horse stood cropping grass and waiting patiently over his fallen rider.

When the Ranger reached Lake Sabine a little later, with the sign of the herd still running ahead of him, he studied the broken jigsaw shoreline, deeply indented and overgrown with brush and trees. Plenty of places here to hide that pirate ship, he mused. But without a boat of some sort, it would be a long, wearisome, galling task to search the shores and hunt the craft out. Well, that could wait. Right now Hatfield meant to keep on the trace of the cattle, and he was growing more and more worried about Red Bouchard and Fox Edley.

He thought, I got them into the Rangers. Hate to get them killed off on their first big assignment. Sometimes it seems like I'm a Jonah to almost everybody who works with me.

He was positive now that the herd had not crossed into Louisiana, for if there had been any crossing it would have occurred north of the lake where the river was narrower and shallower. Hatfield went on southward into Sabine Pass, and discovered there what he had come to anticipate. Diverging from the trail at various points were the tracks of bunches of cattle, driven off into side canyons on the west.

He wondered, why had Furlong lied about this, if he wasn't working undercover with Donovan and the rustlers?

From the beginning, Furlong and Donovan had resented Hatfield's coming to the Sabine. The pattern was forming, at last.

Hatfield rode through to the bottom of the Pass, and turned back into it again. No stock had been taken south of Sabine Pass. Somewhere back in the western hills and woodlands, the stolen cattle were hidden, grazing in some obscure valley.

Hatfield selected the canyon into which the largest herd had turned and headed westward, with gray-green eyes alert and roving, his Winchester across the saddlebow. After twisting and turning for a couple of miles, the canyon floor began to rise between its jagged walls, until floor and walls alike merged into rimrock, beyond which nothing was visible but distant hilltops and mesas.

Letting Goldy climb at his own steady pace, Hatfield relaxed in the saddle. He was sure now that Furlong had been returning from here when they'd met upriver. The identity of the riders holding

the herd should indicate who was behind the rustling—if Hatfield recognized any of them. He expected to find some Stirrup hands, and possibly a few of Furlong's allies from the Crown. Natchez Dupree and his two half-breed gunnies, Swamp Eagle and Kronk, might also be present.

Hatfield breasted the rise and cleared the summit, dropping at once into a nearby screen of jack-pines and scrub cedar. Far below in a deep sunken valley, carpeted with sun-cured grass and rimmed on all sides with hills and buttes, a great herd drifted at graze. As Hatfield had expected, all the westward-running canyons opened into this long low trough, with a creek winding through it like a scrolled sun-bright ribbon.

Uncasing and focusing his binoculars, the Ranger swept the lowlands with scrupulous care. He saw distant riders, but none he could identify. He could read the brands on some of the nearest steers. All the irons of the Sabine were represented, it seemed, with the Stirrup in predominance. That kind of wrecked his theory about Iron Mike Donovan's being the king of the rustlers, unless Mike wasn't the true owner of that spread.

Then Hatfield remembered that he hadn't seen a Crown brand below. It required a long, sweeping search before the high-powered glasses revealed one or two. He wondered exactly what that meant.

It could be that Rod Furlong, the Crown foreman, was at the head of the rustling, but why should he spare the beef belonging to the Corays? Perhaps out of deference to Iris and Mort, yet Hatfield doubted this. There was still a mystery here, something that defied his reach and grasp and comprehension.

LOWERING the field-glasses, Hatfield noticed for the first time the sod roof of a dugout jutting from the slope directly below his position in the runted trees. Beside it was a crude pole corral holding two horses, and one of them was the gotch-eared dun that had been Bark Otis's! Which meant to the Ranger, that the other mount undoubtedly belonged to Natchez Dupree, and the badman might be alone in that side hill soddy. If so, it was set up to perfection.

Hatfield left Goldy untied in the scrub timber, and walked down the slope toward the outthrust turf roof and the small shelf on which the shanty and corral were built. The timing was exquisite, like something on the stage. As Hatfield neared the back of the hut, Natchez Dupree emerged into the front yard, stretching and yawning, his oily black hair disheveled from sleep. His hands were empty and he wore no gunbelt. It couldn't have been better for Hatfield's purposes.

Broad and swarthy and heavy-muscled, Natchez Dupree stood there with huge fists on thick hips, staring at the cattle on the grasslands below with a proprietary air that Hatfield found revolting and infuriating.

A desperado and boastful about it! A cheap flashy gunman, who would torment a cripple, use five to one odds to bushwhack a foe, and shoot an old man like Bark Otis in the back! An outlaw who had burned and pillaged, looted, plundered and raped throughout the Sabine country, without a shade of mercy, compunction or regret!

Hatfield crept forward on the sod roof of the dugout, bent on taking Dupree alive, beating the truth out of him, and forcing Natchez to lead him to the pirate headquarters in Congo Bog. The far-away riders down there couldn't see onto this shelf, and wouldn't know a fight was going on unless guns were fired. Dupree was unarmed, and Hatfield had no intention of using his weapons, unless he was forced to club a gun-barrel on that greasy skull. He didn't think that would be necessary.

Crouching at the front edge of the roof, Hatfield measured the height and distance, and took off in a tremendous leap at the bandit's back. He was in mid-air when Natchez Dupree came spinning about, a startled look on his dark, scarred face. Hatfield crashed into him and Dupree went over backward, using the hurtling momentum to bring up his heavy legs and boot Hatfield on over his head.

They scrambled up simultaneously in the rising dust, but Dupree was sledging at the back of Hatfield's neck before the Ranger could turn to face him. Punished cruelly about the neck and spine, Hatfield caught one of the flashing fists, levered the arm over his shoulder, and hurled Dupree flying overhead to fall heavily on his back.

Before Natchez could recover, Jim Hatfield was on top of him, jolting both hands into the snarling face, driving the long-haired head deep into the dirt. But once again Dupree exploded with enough violence to fling Hatfield off in a rolling sprawl.

This time they came erect face to face, slugging away with unleashed fury, giving and taking with terrific speed and power, swaying to and fro across the trampled ground. The man fought better than Hatfield had foreseen. They were both bruised and bleeding in the first minutes.

Swinging until they were arm-weary, they stumbled into a grappling clinch and whirled dizzily around, straining for the advantage. Dupree had the strength of a mad gorilla, and the Ranger could not break and throw him.

Dupree butted his head into Hatfield's chin, and drilled both hands home below the belt. The Ranger staggered back and doubled over in tearing agony. Natchez smashed him left and right, full on the jaw, and Hatfield went down with lights bursting and rocketing in his brain. Dupree jumped in to stomp at his face, but Hatfield rolled away and spilled the bad-man with a sudden sweep of his long legs. The Ranger was up first, waiting, and Dupree's black eyes were incredulous.

"What keeps you up?" he panted, spitting a crimson stream.

"Have to hit harder'n that," Hatfield said, chest heaving painfully, the metallic taste of blood filling his mouth.

THEY came together a little slower now, both hurt and tired. But when Hatfield struck it was faster than ever, and Dupree's head rocked from side to side. Hatfield was beating him to every punch by this time, hitting always swifter and harder, lashing Dupree back until his shoulders were on the corral rails.

Hatfield stood off and motioned his man out. Dupree stumbled forward with some reluctance, his arms suddenly too heavy to hold up in front of him. Hatfield hooked viciously to the head, but Dupree was merely pawing the air, his eyes gashed and half-blinded, his strength gone. A left laid him on the corral bars again, and he sagged there with drooping head and blood-dripping face.

"Enough, Natchez?" asked the Ranger.

Dupree swore defiantly and launched himself off the wood, swinging wildly. Hatfield strode in, striking with the speed of light—one-two, one-two—and Dupree was back on the rails, then toppling forward on his mutilated face, to lie full length at Hatfield's feet.

"Gamer—than I—thought," Hatfield panted, and he was spitting red as he dragged Dupree's heavy body into the dirt-floored shack.

After cleaning his own hands and face in a bucket of water, Hatfield swabbed off Dupree's features, then dumped the contents of the bucket over the outlaw's head. Dupree came to, sputtering and blowing water, and sobbing for air.

"We'll have a little talk while you're resting, Natchez," said Hatfield. "And then we'll take a little ride—to Lafitte's place in the Bog— Who's behind all this rustling?"

"Nobody—but me. I'm the—top man."

"You're a liar, Natchez," drawled Hatfield, drawing his righthand Colt. "You want me to work you over with this gun-barrel? My knuckles are too sore for me to use them on you any more."

Dupree shrank back, terror in his swollen, blackened eyes. "I don't know—mister. Honest to God, I don't."

"You work with the pirates, don't you?"

"Sometimes."

"Jean Lafitte Third is their captain? That much is true then. You take orders from him?"

"Some of the time."

"Who else do you take orders from?

Don't make me use this gun on you, Natchez." Hatfield waved the long barrel in front of that ruined face.

"Furlong."

"So he is in it, of course. But you don't think he's the big boss?"

"I don't know—honest I don't!" Dupree said desperately, moaning.

"Well, we'll let that go for the time being," Hatfield said kindly. "You'll take me to Lafitte in Congo Bog, won't you?"

"Ain't got much choice, have I?" mumbled Dupree.

"No, you haven't," Hatfield admitted. "Get up and try your legs now. Time we were moving out of here, Natchez."

Dupree got slowly to his feet and moved unsteadily about the room, under Hatfield's watchful eye and ready gun.

"All right, I can ride. But you're crazy, to go into the Bog."

"Maybe so. But that's where we're going.—Why did you kill Bark Otis, Natchez?"

"Because he drove us off you. I knew you was some kind of lawdog. And because he was going to guide you into the Bog."

"Bayles and Hunter are dead," Hatfield told him. "You're next, Natchez."

Dupree grunted. "You won't kill nobody but yourself, going into that Bog, mister."

"I'll get you, Natchez. No matter what happens. Get your gear on your horse now. Leave the carbine here with your sixguns. You're all through using guns, Natchez. You shot one too many men in the back."

"Bayles and Hunter shot Otis," protested Dupree.

"You were there," Hatfield said coldly. "If they did, it was under your orders."

"I was under orders too, you know."

"Whose orders?"

"Rod Furlong's."

"And he took his orders from who? Iron Mike Donovan?"

Natchez Dupree laughed shortly. "I don't hardly think so. We got more of Donovan's cattle here than anybody else's."

"Then Furlong must be the chief?" Hatfield persisted.

"When I said I didn't know I was telling the truth," Dupree declared. "You can beat me till hell freezes over and it won't change that none."

Jim Hatfield smiled gravely. "There's been enough beating for a while. We're going to do some riding now, Natchez."

"You're one hellcat of a fighter, mister," Dupree muttered grudgingly, fingering his misshapen features with tender care.

"You aren't bad yourself, Natchez," said Hatfield.

CHAPTER IX

Congo Massacre

ABOUT five miles north of Lake Sabine, Natchez Dupree, an unarmed and most unwilling guide, turned westward off the river road and led Jim Hatfield toward the steaming green depths of Congo Bog.

"Are we apt to run into any outguards?" Hatfield asked.

"They don't need no outguards in there," Dupree said.

"Don't try to warn them of our coming, Natchez."

"I ain't crazy," said Dupree. "With empty hands I ain't arguing against loaded guns."

"How many ways are there into the Bog?"

"Plenty of ways. But damn few men know them."

Hatfield smiled at Dupree's wide back. "You boys had quite a machine built up here. Too bad to tear it down, Natchez."

"It ain't tore down yet," Dupree reminded him. "And no one man—not even you—is ever going to bust it up."

"I've got some help, somewhere in this country."

Dupree laughed mockingly. "That's what you think, mister! Your two friends are prisoners—if Lafitte hasn't tortured

them to death by now."

"You sure about that, Natchez?" demanded Hatfield, feeling chilled and hollow.

"I saw 'em yesterday on my way down. One with red hair and beard. The other thin and tough and bow-legged."

"Shove along," Hatfield ordered curtly. "And don't try to lead me wrong, or I'll feed you to the 'gators."

"You figure on tackling thirty or forty men?" jeered Dupree.

"With you for a shield, maybe I will."

"They'd shoot me in a minute to get you."

"Console yourself with that thought then, Natchez," said Jim Hatfield. "And get going—make some time."

This trail was broader, more solid and substantial than the northern entrance Hatfield had taken yesterday, but the surrounding swampland was equally odorous, vile and depressing. Great lagoons spread on either side, rimmed with quicksand, hyacinths and reeds, dotted with lily pads and studded with great gaunt cypresses and pond pines.

Herons and cranes fished the stagnant waters, wood ibis and egrets winged the sultry air, and huge scaly alligators and crocodiles drowsed on the mud banks. Parrots shrilled raucously from palmettos, and snakes glided slickly through the canebrake.

Barrier beaches and shell islands rose at intervals, residue from the bed of an ancient ocean. And a foul mist clouded the heat-laden atmosphere.

"What's Lafitte's place like?" asked Hatfield, wiping his sore, sweat-varnished face with his bandanna.

"It ain't much," Dupree said. "A big blockhouse and some smaller shacks and shanties, on a big *cheniere*, with bayou water round most of it. You'll never get close to it."

"We'll see," Hatfield said patiently. "What about this new Lafitte?"

"Kind of crazy, but a good seaman, I guess. Rings in his ears and all that. Thinks he's the first Jean Lafitte reborn. Likes to use old pirate tortures on prisoners." Natchez Dupree shuddered in his saddle.

"Get along there," Hatfield urged grimly, sickened at the thought of Bouchard and Edley at the mercy of such a monster.

The afternoon was waning when they heard outbursts of gunfire from the depths of the Bog ahead of them.

"What the hell?" said Dupree, glancing back at Hatfield with astonishment in his swollen, discolored eyes. "I don't get that, mister. All that shooting."

"Maybe it's a mutiny," Hatfield suggested.

The firing went on, crackling and rolling like distant thunder, muted by the boiling dampness of this drowned land. Faint screams soared up in the intermittent lulls. The pirate stronghold was embattled, beyond any question, but by what force neither Hatfield nor Dupree could imagine. Unless there was a revolt in the ranks, and the corsairs were fighting among themselves.

IT WAS all over, the shooting had ceased, before they came within sight of the vast central bayou with its great shell island. Dismounting and leaving their horses in a cluster of tulip trees, Dupree and Hatfield crept forward to peer from cover at the scene.

Powdersmoke shrouded the blockhouse and shanties, bodies littered the ground, and Hatfield saw with horror that grotesquely painted half-naked reddish-black savages were swarming all over *Cheniere* Lafitte. So Bark Otis had been telling the truth, after all! The terrible Karankahuas still existed, and they had overrun and annihilated the pirate crew of Jean Lafitte III!

The Indians, most of them showing an admixture of Negro blood, were engaged in looting the stone blockhouse, firing the wooden shacks, and torturing wounded prisoners. A hideous screaming rose in the hot foggy air.

Jim Hatfield trained his glasses on the carnage. Red Bouchard and Fox Edley must be long-since dead. If the buccaneers hadn't killed them previously, they had

certainly died in this Kronk onslaught. Ill and gagging with nausea, Hatfield searched the hacked and bloody corpses in vain for Bouchard's red beard and the slim, wiry form of Fox Edley. He couldn't find them, but their bodies must be lying there among the mangled forms.

Dupree was too overcome to make any attempt to escape, while Hatfield was busy with the binoculars.

"Lemme see them glasses," Dupree begged hoarsely, as Hatfield lowered them from his shocked eyes and drawn, gaunted face.

Hatfield handed them over and stood on shaking legs, retching drily and trying to quell the upheaval of his sick stomach. The Karankahuas were cavorting and howling like maniacs, brandishing confiscated rifles, pistols and cutlasses, as they danced about their dead and dying victims.

This, thought the Ranger, would have been a good thing for Texas, if Bouchard and Edley hadn't been butchered along with the pirates. But their loss robbed Hatfield of any satisfaction he might have felt at the wiping out of Jean Lafitt III's crew.

"I don't see Lafitte or Chopper," said Dupree. "And I can't find your two boys either—Almighty God, what a mess! What a bloody, rotten slaughter!" His scarred, battered face was paler than Hatfield had ever seen it, and his bruised black eyes held a haunted look.

The last shrieking died away finally, under slashing blades and blasting guns, and both the Ranger and the bandit sighed in relief.

"Reckon we better pull out of here, Natchez," said Jim Hatfield.

Dupree nodded wearily. "I reckon. Before them Kronks start looking around too much. I never want to see nothing like that again, and I always thought I had a strong stomach." Dupree returned the glasses, and Hatfield put them back in the leather case.

"Wonder if any of them got away?" Hatfield said thoughtfully.

"Don't look like it," Dupree said.

"Did you know there were still Kronks in the Bog?"

"I'd heard about 'em, but I didn't believe it," Dupree said.

"I didn't believe it either, when Bark Otis told me."

"Well, they did a good job for you, lawman."

Hatfield shook his fine dark head. "Not so good, Natchez. Not if Bouchard and Edley died there."

"They must've died," Dupree declared. "They had 'em in that grilled guardhouse, the shanty them Injuns just set fire to. The door's open. The Kronks must've drug 'em out."

"I suppose so," Hatfield said dully. "Let's get back to the horses."

"Wonder if them Kronks still eat them they kill?" Dupree muttered morbidly.

"I don't think so," said Hatfield. "But they still enjoy killing, and that's for sure."

Back in the saddle, with Dupree in the lead, they started retracing their course out of the Bog.

WHAT next? Hatfield thought. The pirates were gone, but the rustlers remained to be rounded up. He had Dupree and he'd have to get Furlong, and maybe Furlong would talk. It looked as if the Crown foreman was in charge of the land raiders, yet Hatfield persisted in thinking there was someone higher up, bigger and smarter and tougher than Furlong.

"Does Donovan own the Stirrup outright?" he queried.

"So far as I know, he does," Dupree replied.

"You still refuse to name the big boss?"

"Can't name somebody I don't know. Lafitte and Furlong's as high as I ever went."

"We'll go pick up Furlong then," said Hatfield.

"Better send the Kronks," advised Dupree. "He'll have an army of gunslingers around him."

"I'll get to him," Hatfield said simply, adding: "Don't see how Furlong's been

able to fool Mort Coray so completely."

"That Furlong's a pretty slick article."

"Where are your other two boys, Natchez?"

Dupree shrugged massively. "Don't know. Old Bark nicked them in that fight at the ford. They was restin' up in our cabin on Bayou Lafitte, last I knew."

"Maybe we'll check on them first."

"Rough boys, Kronk and the Eagle," said Dupree. "What kind of a lawdog are you anyway? A Ranger maybe, or a federal?"

"What difference does it make, Natchez?" countered Hatfield.

"It don't make none," Dupree grumbled. "They all stink the same."

Green twilight fell on the swamp, wreathed with white mist, and the moss-strung cypresses took on a ghostly aspect. The two riders were on a narrow natural causeway between two darkening lagoons, in which crocodiles and 'gators surged and wallowed, when something stirred in a thicket ahead.

Dupree reined up short, his bulky shoulders blocking Hatfield's view momentarily. The Ranger pushed forward alongside of his guide, and disgust darkened his somber, bronzed face. Kronk and Swamp Eagle stood there with gloating grins, waist-deep in reeds and canes, their rifles lined on Jim Hatfield.

"Climb down, mister," Natchez Dupree said, with a swarthy smile. Reaching over, he raked the Ranger's Winchester out of its boot.

Hatfield stepped from the saddle, under the muzzles of guns held by the two breeds. Dupree swung down and held the carbine on him.

"Get your hands up!" Dupree commanded, and then to the half-breeds, "If he makes another move, shoot the guts out of him!"

Hatfield stood with his hands raised head-high, his back to the two riflemen. Dupree unlatched the Ranger's gunbelt and let it drop to the soggy earth.

"I owe you two good lickings, lawdog," said Natchez Dupree. "I'm going to pay you off—before I kill you. Step over here and get ready to take it, mister. I'm going to beat you until you beg for death!" He raised his voice to the half-breeds. "Keep him covered close. I got a job to do on him before he dies. You see my face? That's what he did to me. That ain't nothing to what he'll get, though!"

"Am I supposed to fight back, or just stand and take it?" asked Jim Hatfield.

"You ain't doing nothing but taking it this time," Dupree said, with wicked relish. "If he strikes back, boys—if he so much as hits me once—shoot him through the legs. Don't kill him, just shoot the legs from under him. I'll do the rest."

"Thought you were more of a man than this, Natchez," remarked Hatfield, shaking his head sorrowfully.

"I'm man enough for you," Dupree growled. "But I ain't fool enough to give up any advantage I got, mister."

He leaned the Winchester on a palmetto and moved crouching toward the Ranger, great fists knotted, his black eyes shining with a wild, evil light between puffed and empurpled lids.

Jim Hatfield stood waiting calmly, arms hanging at his sides now, trying to figure a way to grapple with Dupree, hold him between those rifles and himself, and get to his Winchester or his Colts. It was his only chance of survival, and an extremely thin one, at best.

Dupree moved in and swung with shattering force at Hatfield's unprotected face, jolting the high dark head back, jarring him all the way to the heels.

CHAPTER X

Turn of the Tide

WHEN the Indian attack came, Red Bouchard and Fox Edley, weak from hunger and punishment, were lying in filthy straw and reeds by the rear way in the one-room guardhouse. Two sentries stood before the open grilled front of the cubicle, taunting the prisoners from time

to time and laughing raucously.

The Rangers had been beaten, flogged, and roughly treated in general, but the real torture hadn't yet begun. The guards said Lafitte was trying to devise something new and special for them.

"We're sure taking some awful lickings lately, Fox," complained Bouchard. "Them Mexicans south of Laredo whopped the hide off our backs awhile ago, and now we're getting it from these pirates."

"It gets kind of tiresome," Edley admitted. "I got along lots easier when I was outside the law. Honesty ain't paying me off the way it's supposed to."

The humid steaming air was suddenly filled with a deadly swishing, whirring sound. The two sentries, transfixed by flights of arrows, became human pincushions and collapsed over the rifles on which they'd been leaning. Unearthly screeches arose as guns started blasting.

Dark coppery savages with fierce Negroid features, stripped to breechclouts and armed with bows, lances, long knives and hatchets, as well as guns, swarmed all over the large shell island and rushed into the encampment. Startled buccaneers went down, screaming, under that mad assault, pierced with barbed, feathered shafts, shot and stabbed, bludgeoned and hacked to pieces.

"Kronks!" panted Red Bouchard. "Cannibal Injuns mixed with old time slave blacks! Thought they died out long ago."

"And Lafitte and Chopper will get clean away!" Fox Edley groaned. "They went out in that ship's boat of theirs—Well, maybe the Injuns won't notice us, Red."

"Them Karankahuas don't miss a thing to kill," Bouchard said glumly. "They'll find us—or burn us up in this rat-trap cage."

Passing warriors paused to slash and mutilate the two dead guards in front of the brig, while Edley and Bouchard flattened out in stark terror at the rear of the cell. A giant savage, more black than red, spotted the prisoners and began smashing at the padlocked grated door with his tremendous warclub.

The padlock burst open, the grilled door swung ajar—and the two Rangers knew their time had come. But a rifle shot from somewhere felled the huge brute, just as he was clawing his way through the barred entrance.

Other Indians swept past to attack the big blockhouse and cabins, paying no attention to the nondescript little jailhouse. Sounds of savage conflict tore the sunlit haze of the swamp. When all the raiders had passed at last, Bouchard and Edley crawled toward the front and peered out through the rusty iron grillwork.

The guardhouse was on the outer edge of camp, and all the Kronks seemed to be milling about the central blockhouse, which represented the final pocket of resistance. With luck the two Rangers might be able to affect an escape, now that the door was unlocked.

Pushing the door open, Bouchard reached out and hauled in the sentries' rifles. The Karankahuas were too intent on mayhem and slaughter to notice him. Lunging outside then, Bouchard unbuckled and yanked off the gunbelts of the guards, diving back to the interior with them.

Each belt was hung with two holstered guns and a sheathed knife. The two men strapped on the belts, picked up the carbines, and were ready to make their break for freedom.

Slipping around the corner of the guardhouse, Bouchard and Edley headed for the eastern side of the island, striving to keep the guardhouse between them and the Indians. The Kronks had come overland and by water, and their dugout canoes had been pulled up on the shell beaches.

Arrows whipped past the running Rangers, and they saw that the main land passage was guarded by two bowmen. Stopping and squaring off to line their rifles, Red and Fox slammed shots into the bowmen before the Kronks could loose any more shafts, knocking the coppery-brown bucks down in the ferns and weeds. Levering fresh shells into chambers, Red Bush and the Fox went on toward the dugouts on the eastern shore.

A NATIVE reared up from the midst of the canoes, bowstring drawn, but Bouchard and Edley threw running shots from the hip and downed that Indian before he had time to release the arrow. Grabbing the nearest pirogue, they pushed off, jumped in, and bent to the paddling, driving the slender craft swiftly out into the broad bayou.

Another brave appeared on the beach, firing an old musket after them. In the stern Fox Edley put down his paddle, and turned with carbine at shoulder, hammering a shot home as the native tried to fit an arrow to his bow. Then they were well away from the island, and the main body of Karankahuas was still preoccupied with the battle raging around the stone blockhouse once the hideaway of old Jean Lafitte and his lieutenant, Dominique.

"If you see any 'gators or crocs coming, Red," called Edley, "don't let 'em get too close."

"Why, they ain't bad at all, Fox, compared to them Injuns," Bouchard said, grinning back over his shoulder.

"Lafitte Third and Chopper'll be heading for their ship in Lake Sabine," said Edley. "Reckon we better take after 'em, Red Bush."

"That's the ticket, Foxface. Hope we can pick up a pair of horses somewheres."

"We might make the Sabine in this canoe. There are waterways through, if we can locate 'em."

Bouchard wagged his red head. "I'd rather get back on board a good bronc." He swore softly. "Listen to them red maniacs back there, Fox! That's an awful massacre, boy."

"I ain't apt to forget it," Edley said solemnly. "I've seen some bad ones, but that one tops 'em all."

"Well, it couldn't've happened to a nicer bunch of white men," Red Bouchard remarked with irony.

Paddling strong and steadily, threading from one bayou to another, they weaved their way eastward in the direction of the Sabine. The dugout canoe was light, well-balanced and sturdy, skimming easily over the water.

The afternoon was fading now, a greenish dusk spreading over the lagoons, with alligators rumbling in the distance and crocodiles splashing in stagnant pools. Spanish moss from partly-submerged cypresses brushed their heads and faces as they plied the paddles from kneeling positions.

It was wonderful to feel free and whole again, to have shell belts around their waists and Colts hanging heavy on their

A TALL TEXAS TALE

IN A PIG'S EYE

THE GENT from Tennessee was built like a piece of string with a knot where his shoulders were and another at the hips, and he said, "Them old razorbacks we had back home was really something. They could hear an acorn drop off'n a oak tree half a mile away, and they was so fast they could catch that there acorn on the first bounce."

"Well, I dunno as you'll have much luck hunting wild boar here in Texas if that's the kind of pigs you're used to," said Elmer Fuddle McWhinney, of the Dallas McWhinneys. "Because those we got down here are pretty sharp. They can hear a canoe floating down a crick and can outrun a bullet, less'n you can catch 'em going upwind. Why, I mind the time I shot at one loping off downwind, after I'd flushed him from where he'd been rubbing the back of his head on an old mesquite limb, and he run just fast enough so the point of that bullet itched the back of his head for a good quarter mile before he was satisfied and pulled away from it like it had hit a post oak. Then there was another time—"

But Elmer Fuddle McWhinney, of the Dallas McWhinneys, noticed then that the stringy man from Tennessee was no longer with him. "And just when I was about to tell him about a really spry old boar I once got a glimpse of," he muttered. "Maybe next time . . ."

hips, and rifles within reach on the bottom of the pirogue. They had been lucky, incredibly fortunate. The Karankahuas had saved them from a horrible death by slow, agonizing torture, presided over by the sadistic, half-crazed Jean Lafitte III.

They were nearing the eastern perimeter of Congo Bog now, crossing wide lagoons bisected by a narrow strip of land, a natural causeway bordered by thickets and palmettos and cottonwoods. Recalling it vaguely from the trip in, when his face had been smashed, his head splitting, Red Bouchard was fairly certain the trail ran along that slim neck of raised ground.

Then, as they slid silently along beneath overhanging boughs and trailing moss and vines beside the strip, Bouchard looked up and saw above low palmettos and agrito the heads and saddled backs of two riderless horses. He raised his hand and pointed. Fox Edley's lean sharp face lighted up at the sight, as he steered for shore beyond and below the horses. Their luck was getting almost too good to be true.

They landed and beached the canoe without a sound. Taking their carbines, they climbed the brush-grown bank with utmost caution, moving out into the trail and advancing past the horses, to see what had become of the riders. Hearing voices and horses ahead, followed by the smack of a fist against flesh and bone, they withdrew once more into the thicket, treading slow and soft and scarcely breathing.

Passing through a bed of reeds, they came upon a strange picture.

TWO squat, dark men of obviously mixed blood stood with rifles leveled, watching a second pair in front of them, and beyond was Hatfield's golden sorrel and another mount. The Lone Wolf was standing with his arms down at his sides, while a burly man with a dark, welted face slugged away at him.

Laying down their rifles and drawing their knives, Bouchard and Edley crept up behind the two breeds. A twig snapped, and Kronk and Swamp Eagle swiveled around and tried to bring their carbines to bear—too late. In on them like twin tigers, Bouchard buried his blade in Kronk's throat, and Edley sank his steel to the hilt in Swamp Eagle's breast.

The two riflemen went down heavily, their blood gushing bright and warm, and Bouchard and Edley cleared their sixguns to cover the man who was beating Hatfield.

Natchez Dupree, facing their way, had seen the knifing. He turned from Hatfield and lunged for the Winchester he had left standing against that palmetto. The big Ranger, his face lumped and traced with scarlet, was after him so fast that Bouchard and Edley had to hold their fire, for fear of hitting their comrade.

Dupree was reaching for the rifle when Hatfield struck him from behind in a reckless flying tackle that sent them both sprawling and tumbling over in the weeds. On his feet like a great cat, Hatfield was poised and waiting as Dupree started to scramble upright. He got as far as his knees, and Hatfield lashed into him with both hands, throwing punches faster than the eye could follow.

Dupree's head bobbed and jerked like something on a string. He fell back with such violence that he turned a complete somersault.

The desperado tried to rise again, but Hatfield was on top of him firing lefts and rights, belting him flat on his shoulders in the dirt. As the Ranger drove in, too enraged to be careful, Natchez thrashed out with both powerful legs, high-heeled boots aimed at the groin. Twisting barely in time, Hatfield took those crippling boots on the hip. Even there it hurt, and knocked him stumbling away.

Rolling over, Natchez Dupree plunged headlong for Hatfield's discarded gunbelt, and had one of the .45s halfway out of the holster when Hatfield landed with both knees in the small of the bandit's back, smashing the breath from his lungs and clubbing his face into the muck with hammerlike fists. Gasping and groaning, Dupree dropped the gun, squirming over and scrabbling to his feet as the Ranger got up off him.

This time Hatfield let Dupree get all the way up, and there was awe and fear and despair in Natchez's torn bloodied eyes and features. Hatfield was in and out with flowing speed and power, beating down Dupree's enfeebled guard, hitting him at will, spearing, slicing, smashing him into a blind, groggy state of helplessness. Sobbing and moaning, Dupree made one last frenzied attempt to stop the Ranger with a full-swinging kick in the crotch.

Jim Hatfield sideslipped it, grasping that upthrown leg and the back of Dupree's neck, lifting him bodily and spinning around with him, letting the man go with a mighty whirling heave. A strangled scream broke from Natchez Dupree as he flew over the embankment and down through the brush, to bounce and roll splashing into the lagoon.

There were other surging splashes—those of crocodiles launching themselves from a nearby muddy bank—and Natchez Dupree shrieked once more as the wicked snouts and long sharp-toothed jaws of the reptilian monsters closed around him. Then he was lost in a thrashing, boiling cauldron that went instantly dark with blood.

Hatfield wheeled away and stumbled back toward the other Rangers, lifting and buckling on his gunbelt with trembling raw-knuckled hands. Taking his Winchester off the tree trunk, he tried to smile at Bouchard and Edley as they came anxiously to his side.

"Sure glad—to see you boys," Hatfield panted. "Old Red Bush—and the Fox. Thought you—were goners. Saw the Kronks—all over Lafitte's island. How'd you ever—get out?"

They told him quickly, while Hatfield gulped canteen water and tried to regain his breath and equilibrium.

"So Jean the Third and his man Chopper got away?" he said ominously.

BOUCHARD inclined his red head. "They'll be making for their ship down in Lake Sabine. We know about where they keep it. We got to get out of here and cut them off, Jim."

"We will," Hatfield said quietly. "Did you learn anything about the rustlers who were working with the pirates?"

"Two men named Furlong and Dupree seem to be running the rustling end," Fox Edley reported.

Hatfield nodded somberly toward the lagoon, where the crocodiles were still weltering about.

"That was Dupree. And I know Furlong. But the first thing to do is to take after Lafitte and his lieutenant, I reckon."

"Well, we got horses now—and one to spare," Red Bouchard said. "I had enough paddling to last me quite a few more years. That saddle's going to feel just like home."

Hatfield mounted his sorrel and took the reins of Dupree's chestnut. They walked back to the other two horses, which had belonged to Kronk and Swamp Eagle. Bouchard and Edley stepped into the leather, and the three Rangers, reunited at last, started on toward the river road in the Sabine Valley.

Darkness was closing in rapidly, and they might have to camp out—at least until moonrise. They had just about time to get out of the Bog, and that was a relief. A vast relief to put Congo Bog behind them, for the last time, they all hoped.

Full night came and it was too dark to travel. Pulling off the trail, they unsaddled and made camp, building a fire and preparing a meal, the main course of which was the beef steak found in the saddle-bags of the three dead rustlers. Bouchard and Edley were starved and ravenous, and Hatfield was hungry enough.

After supper they settled down to smoke and rest and talk, waiting for the moon to come up and light the world.

With a three-quarter golden moon at last aloft in the east, the Rangers saddled up and rode on into its beams until they reached the trail and turned southward, the moon laying an irregular track of radiance across the rippling Sabine River. Hatfield discovered the trace of two fairly

recent riders heading south, and wondered who they might be. Perhaps Lafitte and Chopper had got word to Rod Furlong and one of his chieftains about the disaster in Congo Bog, and the cattlemen were hastening to Lake Sabine to divide the spoils with the pirates.

"A couple of men can't man that ship, of course," Hatfield declared. "Probably the plunder is stored there. If Lafitte can't raise a crew, he'll try to unload and pack the loot away somewhere."

"We better take the next river crossing, Jim," said Bouchard. "The ship's anchored in a cove on the eastern shore, in Louisiana. No road, no travel on that side of the lake. They must have a fortune in the hold."

"If they have it'll be guarded," Edley put in. "Maybe by enough sailors to run the ship. Lafitte's crew could be right there waiting for him."

"That's true, Fox," agreed Hatfield. "If they get away on the ship, it'll be hard to run them down. We've got to catch them before they cast off and start for the coast."

"You're still thinking there's somebody higher up than Lafitte and Furlong, Jim?" inquired Bouchard.

"I did think so, Red. Now I don't know. Can't figure who it could be, if it isn't Iron Mike Donovan. And he's lost more cattle than any of the others, which ought to clear him. I reckon Furlong's our man, after all."

"So you found the rustled stock west of Sabine Pass?" Bouchard said. "I told this Foxface we ought to check them tracks out of the Pass."

"Even I can be wrong once in awhile," drawled Fox Edley. "And think of all the fun we might've missed in Congo Bog, if we'd gone kiting off and got tangled up with them rustlers!"

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CHAPTER XI

Buccaneers at Bay

REACHING the Sabine at a shallow stretch, the three Rangers forded the river and rode down the Louisiana side, the prints of two horsemen still ahead of them. Somebody certainly had the same objective in mind, Hatfield reflected. He hoped it was Furlong and one of his boys.

If the Rangers were in time, they might be able to wrap the whole thing up in one sweeping stroke. Then it would simply be routine, with the help of the Crown and the Stirrup and other Sabine riders, to drive off the remaining underlings and rescue the stolen stock from that long deep valley west of the Pass.

The three riders pushed on at a good steady pace, and soon the waters of Lake Sabine spread before them, glittering in the moonlight, hemmed in by that broken wooded shoreline.

"They're supposed to be moored near the north end," Bouchard said. "Watch for lights there, boys."

"Thought I caught a glimmer just then," Edley announced.

"Probably a firefly, Fox," scoffed Bouchard.

"I saw a flicker of light," Hatfield said. "Let's stretch 'em out a little." He was still leading Natchez Dupree's chestnut gelding.

"Well, I ain't goin' to argue with *your* eyes, Lone Wolf," growled Bouchard.

Hatfield smiled fondly at his companions. "They've made mistakes before now, Red Bush."

"Not too many, Jim," said Red Bouchard, and then assumed a bantering tone: "What was you doin' all this time, while Fox and me was sufferin' unbearable tortures on that pirate island?"

"Well, there was a barroom ruckus, a big friendly rancher and his beautiful blonde sister," Hatfield said gravely. "A

wild hog hunt, bushwhackers on the trail, an old brushpopper who got killed for saving my life, and Stirrup riders who put a noose on my neck for rustling cattle. There was a gunfight in the Bog, with two bandits dead, and a couple of fist fights with our late friend, Natchez Dupree. That brings it up to date."

"Sure, you always have all the fun," Bouchard griped. "And poor Fox and me take all the punishment."

"I see some more fireflies," drawled Fox Edley. "In that third inlet there."

They moved quietly in through the scattered timber and tangled brush, dismounting and tying their horses well back from the shore, and advancing on foot with carbines under arms. From a piney ridge they looked down into the narrow bay, nearly enclosed by thrusting points of land, where the low sleek corsair craft lay broadside and close to the shoreline.

Flickering yellow light fell from hanging or bobbing-about lanterns, aboard and on land. The vessel was painted black, no name on the bow, no flag flying. She looked as swift and deadly as she had proved herself to be, in many bloody encounters on the Gulf of Mexico.

An unloading operation was in progress, heavy bags being lowered from the rail to men on shore, who stowed them in large rawhide *aparejos* on a train of mules. Four men worked on land, with two busy on board, and three others stood watching in the near starboard bow. Enough hands to man the ship, in a pinch, Hatfield estimated.

The only one he recognized was lanky Rod Furlong, talking to the two pirates at the bow, whom Bouchard quickly identified as Jean Lafitte III and the lieutenant known as Chopper. Hatfield wondered if they were unloading everything, or just Furlong's share of the swag.

Putting his glasses on the scene, splashed with yellow lantern-glow and filtering silver moonlight, Jim Hatfield studied the vulture-faced ear-ringed Lafitte and the brawny giant Chopper, as they conversed with the tall, bleak Furlong. The Ranger thought, nine men. We can surprise and take them, some of them alive, I hope.

Then all of a sudden there were ten men all told, as a fourth figure appeared in the bow. And at sight of him Jim Hatfield felt the quick cold revolt of his stomach, a fierce agonizing spasm of protest in his mind and breast. For that fourth man was Morton Coray, that big tawny blond panther of a man, strikingly handsome and graceful, smiling and easy and superbly sure of himself.

SO THAT was the answer! Mort Coray was the big boss, the brains of the entire land-and-sea organization. Even with the proof under his eyes, Hatfield could not believe it at once.

Why had Mort Coray befriended him then, saved his life from Dupree's bunch, and then from Iron Mike Donovan and his crew, when any stranger in the Sabine was a natural menace to Coray and his widespread outlaw program? It didn't hold together, didn't make any sense at all. Unless Coray was so confident of his own success and Hatfield's inevitable failure, providing he had tagged Jim as a law officer, that Mort figured he could afford to be benevolent.

Or perhaps Coray had been kind and tolerant because of his sister's interest in Hatfield, and his own instinctive liking for the Ranger. And of course Hatfield had risked his own life to rescue Coray from death under the tusks of those wild razorback hogs.

But it was still a puzzle. It didn't make sense yet, and Hatfield decided it never would.

But some things were clear now, the murder of old Bark Otis in particular. When Hatfield had told Mort Coray about Bark's saving him at the ford, and the prospect of the old-timer's guiding him into Congo Bog, he had unwittingly sealed Bark Otis's death warrant. Through Rod Furlong, Coray had promptly sent Natchez Dupree and his gunmen to kill Bark Otis.

Hatfield thought bitterly, but who can you trust, if you can't trust a man who

twice saves your life and takes you into his home and approves of his sister's falling in love with you?

Well, Mort Coray had to die now—it wasn't likely he'd surrender—and Jim Hatfield would have to kill him, if he could, as much as he hated to lift a gun against the man.

He turned his glasses on the four men at the shoreline, who were receiving the goods from the ship and packing them on the stolid waiting line of mules. They were apparently unarmed. Coray and Furlong were the only two cattlemen in the party of ten. Hatfield passed the binoculars along to Bouchard, saying:

"The big blond man in the bow is Furlong's boss, the big he-wolf of the whole outfit, I reckon. I want him myself—alive, if possible. We'll go down and jump the men on shore. They aren't armed, except maybe with knives. Then we'll open up on those aboard."

Bouchard nodded, and handed the glasses on to Edley. "Fox and I'll be aiming at Lafitte and Chopper first, I reckon."

"I'll take Furlong," said Hatfield. "The two sailors on board won't be any trouble, but Coray is pretty good with sixguns. He'll try to fight his way out and break away. If he jumps ashore and I go after him, you boys take care of the others and hold 'em here. Don't take any chances. Shoot 'em all if you have to."

"A pleasure," Fox Edley drawled. "After what they done to us."

They went skulking down the brush-grown slope into the cove, crouching low and moving in along the line of pack-mules, taking the four sailors in total surprise.

"You're covered tight, men!" Hatfield called, guns lined in his great hands. "Get down flat on your faces and don't move, or you'll get it in the back."

Taking one look at the six gun-muzzles on them, the four privateers stretched out on their bellies in the sand. They worked for wages, and this was no skin off them. They had no intention of dying to protect their leaders' plunder.

The two seamen amidships vanished into the hold as they saw their mates flatten out on the beach, and the four chieftains in the bow reached for their weapons and searched for targets ashore. Aiming and firing from behind the pannier-slung mules, the Rangers drilled shots home as outlaw guns began to blaze and roar.

Mules went down kicking and braying in agony and panic, and slugs showered the Rangers with mud and sand and mule-blood. But Hatfield already had two .45 slugs in Rod Furlong, draping him over the rail in his death throes.

THE carrion-bird face of Jean Lafitte III went black with blood, a shark-toothed grimace baring his teeth as Red Bouchard's bullet ripped through his turbaned skull and dropped him backward on the deck. Fox Edley, targeting on the massive torso of Chopper, riddled that hulking form with three swift shots.

Only Mort Coray was left on the bow. He was already leaping landward, crashing down in the reeds and plunging headlong into the nearest thicket.

"I've got him!" Hatfield yelled, breaking in that direction. "You boys take care of the sailors and hold the mules and ship."

Hatfield could hear the hurried progress of Mort Coray writhing through underbrush and trampling ferns, ahead of him. The sounds indicated that Coray was circling around, probably in an effort to reach the Rangers' horses. Hatfield lengthened his strides without regard for noise, using elbows and shoulders and hips to plough through the brambles and thickets of bindweed and agrito.

When Coray stopped, somewhere short of the horses, Hatfield also halted and waited, every sense keened and alert. As the silence continued, Hatfield started creeping onward with the stealth of an Indian.

Coray began moving again, placing speed ahead of caution, but Hatfield was much nearer now, breaking into a run himself up the grade. Coray crossed the piney ridgetop and paused once more, so close now that Hatfield could hear his

hard, heavy breathing as he cleared the crest and slipped down the reverse slope.

"Might's well stop running, Mort!" called the Ranger. "I'm going to get you anyway."

"Turn back, you fool!" shouted Coray. "I don't want to kill you, Jim. Go back to the ship. You'll never take me."

"You're done for, Mort. You'll never get away. Why don't you give yourself up?"

Mort Coray laughed, a sound clear and musical in the night. "You're lousy with luck, Jim. But it's going to run out, if you don't get off my tail. You owe me one life, don't you? Well, here's your chance to pay up."

"That's all gone by," Hatfield said. "Why did you save my life anyway, Mort?"

"Because I liked you maybe," Coray said. "And Iris was half in love with you. And I couldn't see one man offering any threat to my organization."

"There's more to it than that, Mort."

"Well, I figured you were a Ranger," said Mort Coray, in pleasant conversational tones. "Jim Hatfield's the name, isn't it? I thought you'd find nothing and go away, and I really didn't want to have you hurt or killed. Any more than I wanted to bring a whole troop of Rangers into the Sabine, looking for the Lone Wolf or his mortal remains. Is that plain enough, Jim?"

"Reckon it is, Mort," Jim Hatfield said. "Now I'm coming in after you."

"Don't do it, Jim!" cried Mort Coray. I—I don't meet too many men I like, as much as I like you. I don't want to have to kill you!"

"It's you or me, Mort—if you won't surrender. There's no other way out."

"You've got all the rest, everything else. You don't need me, Jim."

"You're the big one, Mort," said Hatfield. "The one I've got to have. Throw down your guns and come out with your hands up."

"Like hell!" Mort Coray laughed and fired in the direction of the Ranger's voice, the lead crackling through the thick underbrush nearby.

Hatfield threw down and thumbed a shot at the muzzle flash, but Coray's gun flared again from a slightly different position as Hatfield ducked aside and let go once more at the gunflame. Then Coray was running for the horses, with the Ranger racing after him.

Branches switched painfully across Hatfield's bruised, sweaty face, and moonlight splintered down through leafy boughs. Hatfield stumbled over a rock and almost fell. Coray was going to reach the horses for sure this trip.

IN FULL stride again, Hatfield did a little figuring. Two shells left in his right-hand Colt, and the other was still fully loaded. There wasn't time to stop and refill the first gun, but eight bullets ought to be enough. He could hear the horses snorting and stamping now, probably at the appearance of Coray.

For a half-second he almost wished Coray would get away, for he had honestly liked the big, charming blond man. Then he thought of all the crimes and deaths Coray was responsible for, and drove himself onward with teeth set.

When Jim Hatfield burst into that small open glade, Mort Coray was already mounted on the first horse he had come to, which happened to be Natchez Dupree's chestnut. Coray's shot slashed bark and wood splinters across Hatfield's sweat-runneled cheek, and Hatfield's slug struck the horse.

Bugling and bucking wildly, the crazed chestnut almost unseated Coray, then came in a blind, thundering charge at the Ranger. Coray's gun torched down at him with searing closeness as Hatfield fired back and dived desperately to one side to avoid the trampling hoofs.

Hatfield was up on his knees in the rank weeds, holstering his empty Colt and lifting the weapon in his left hand when Coray brought the wounded horse about in a rearing turn, and threw a shot that scorched the Ranger's wet neck. Hatfield fired left-handed, and the chestnut plunged to earth, kicking up dirt.

Mort Coray sprang clear and landed lightly on his feet, erect and balanced. Hatfield was standing now, and they faced one another across forty-odd feet of moon-gilded grass and lacy ferns.

"Drop 'em, Mort," pleaded Hatfield, left thumb on the hammer.

"Not a chance, Jim," said Coray, raising his barrel into line.

Hatfield's hammer fell first, by a fractional second, the flame streaking out blue-and-orange, the gun lifting hard in his hand. Coray twirled sideward from the shocking smash of lead, as his own Colt blared a trifle out of line. Hatfield winced at the hot breath of the bullet, and saw Coray sinking slowly to his knees, firing low into the ground and raking up dust streamers, silver gauze in the moonbeams.

Pulling down from the recoil, Jim Hatfield thumbed off one more shot. Mort Coray heaved upright on the impact, whirled in a blundering bewildered circle, tripped and pitched into a long staggered fall, to lie with his bright blond head pillowed on the side of the dead chestnut gelding.

Hatfield crossed the clearing and stood over the horse and man, mechanically reloading his guns, deep regret and satisfaction mingled within him. Another death, another chapter closing.

Turning back to the horses, Hatfield untied them and mounted Goldy, leading the other two mounts over the pine-wooded ridge and down to the hidden bay.

Red Bouchard and Fox Edley had the six sailors trussed up securely, and were standing guard over them and the picketed pack-mules. Rod Furlong still hung over the rail, with Jean Lafitte III and Chopper sprawled dead on the deck behind him. This part of it was all over, too, the pirate crew all but obliterated.

They had the seamen digging graves by lanternlight when they heard a company of horsemen coming in the night. They doused the lights and withdrew to cover until the approaching force could be identified. Hatfield saw Iris Coray and Iron Mike Donovan, at the head of a column of Crown and Stirrup riders, guided by a blank-faced young puncher who was weaponless and tied in his saddle.

"My brother?" asked Iris Coray quietly.

"I'm sorry, Iris," said Hatfield, indicating one of the blanket-wrapped bodies.

"I expected it," said the girl, stepping down and walking toward the body of her brother. "We've just learned what Mort and Furlong have been doing in the Sabine."

"Mister, I owe you a lot of apologies," Iron Mike Donovan rumbled. "I'm sorry—and ashamed of myself. I hope some day I can make it up to you, Ranger."

"That's all right, Mike," Hatfield said, glancing at the captive cowboy. "Did he tell you where the cattle are?"

Donovan nodded his large bald head. "We're on our way to get them."

"Camp here till morning, and we'll go along with you," Hatfield suggested. "Got a lot of pirate spoils here to check and pack."

"Good idea, I reckon," Iron Mike Donovan said.

Iris Coray had walked down to the shoreline, and stood staring out over the moon-silvered waves of Lake Sabine.

Jim Hatfield sauntered thoughtfully after her, his fine hard features grave and sad. Perhaps he could comfort and cheer the girl a little, in her desolate hour of loss and hurt and need. The least he could do was try. He owed that much to her and Mort Coray and himself.

Next Month's Exciting Jim Hatfield Novel

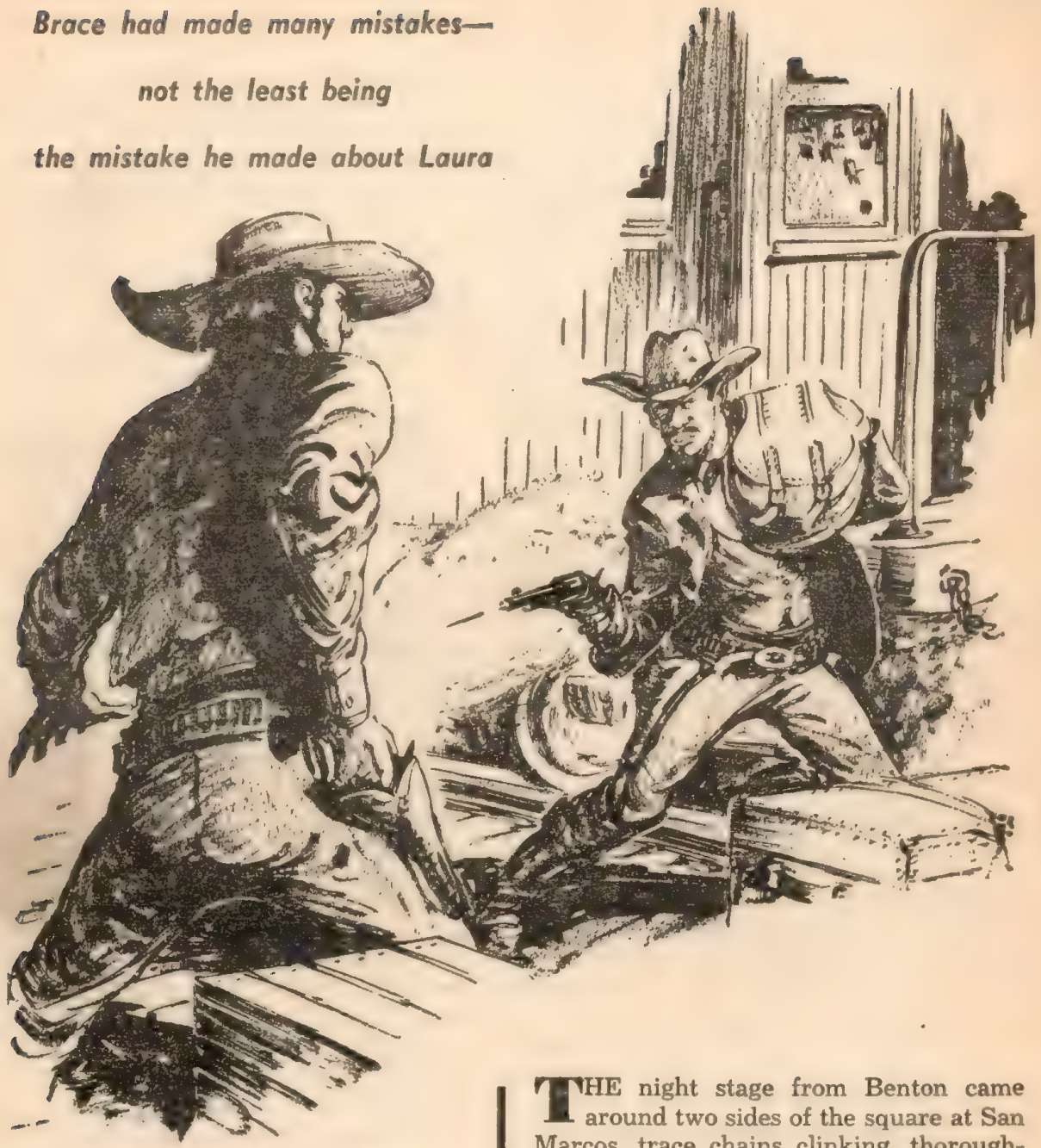
THE SWORD OF AMONTILLO

By JACKSON COLE

Brace had made many mistakes—

not the least being

the mistake he made about Laura



NIGHT in SAN MARCOS

By FRANK P. CASTLE

THE night stage from Benton came around two sides of the square at San Marcos, trace chains clinking, thoroughbraces whining, and rocked to a stop at the new, brightly lighted railroad depot.

Bats squeaked in the sooty dusk. A faint breeze rustled the parched willows in the square. On the east side, lights and cheerful noise spilled from a block of saloons. And on the west side, Brace Renning stood at the door of the Golconda mine's San Marcos office, with Luke Turner beside him.

"You had it figured right; Creede isn't

aboard," Turner muttered. "A drummer there, getting out and into the hotel hack. Only one other passenger, a woman. . . ."

"Know who she is?" Brace asked.

Turner had a wide acquaintance among the women of the territory. He was lean, handsome, young, reckless-looking, and wore a tied-down Colt. He did the kind of gunwork a gold property often needed.

"Can't tell, for sure," he said. "Want me to go check on her, find if she knows anything?"

"No." Brace was as tall as Turner, not much older, though with a grimmer set to his features, an expression hinting at some hurt he couldn't forget. "Wait here for Wick Hibbard—"

There was no need. A horse paced up outside and stopped. Slow steps came across the walk. Wick Hibbard stood in the doorway. Once he had been what Turner was now, and only a handful of years ago. Something had cracked his nerve. Underneath there was still some strength, though—or so Brace Renning had thought. It was the reason he had given Hibbard a job.

"His bags are on the coach, Brace," Hibbard said. "The driver picked them up at Solari's. Maybe somebody ought to ride there."

"Me, then," Turner said, with an abrasive laugh. "Creede is pretty, but he's also fancy Dan with a gun. Somebody's needed to ride to Solari's who can stop him, not just wave the boy good-by! That checks you out, Wick—"

Hibbard's nostrils flared at the taunt. But he did not reply, only looked down at the planks under his feet.

"Nobody rides to Solari's," Brace said. "He'll have to come on here. Luke, get his bags and take them to my room. Wick, go check the depot. It's the Limited he's after. He'll probably try to get aboard just as it is leaving."

They nodded, Turner laughing again, and left him. Brace stepped out to the walk. He lighted a cigar, looking at the willows in the square. A bench was over there, hidden by darkness. On just such a night as this, he had asked Laura to marry him, on that bench. It made bitter remembering.

A VOICE came gently, from nearby:

"I've been watching, Brace, and I don't like what I see. . . ."

Brace turned, lifting the match. He saw Pete Muir, Marshal of San Marcos.

"You've sharp ears, too, Pete. What have you heard?"

"That the paymaster up at the mine got killed last night. That right?"

"Yes. Dodge Phillips sent Wick Hibbard through to Ladera on a fast horse to get the news to me."

"Lose much?"

"Thirty-five thousand—the full monthly payroll."

"And," Muir said, "you and your boys came on from Ladera, figuring to collar whoever did it, in San Marcos?"

"Maybe."

"Don't fend me off, Brace. I heard that somebody has turned up missing at the Golconda—Roy Creede."

Brace was silent. Muir shrugged.

"I can figure it as well as you can, son. He'll time himself on into town just in time to grab the Coast Limited. And it's my job to take him. You lay off!"

"Sorry, Pete," Brace said, voice gritty. "Not this time. It goes too deep—"

"Don't you think I know? I've heard the talk since your wife left you—stoppered it when I could. You must have just begun to realize the reason she went away. But killing won't ease the hurt—"

Brace turned abruptly and went down the walk with long strides.

He rounded the corner on Fort Street, and slowed his pace. Now he walked with a memory—a figure in white, head tilted with a mischievous smile, dark curls dancing, the music of her laughter a ghostly echo. Thus Laura had walked beside him, once.

He felt sick and old and tired. Muir was right. He had just begun to understand, these past few days, the amused smiles from those who didn't care for him, the sniggering laughter, the rough jokes. Laura and Roy Creede. . . .

Brace turned in at the Pitman House. Polly Lawton was at the desk, a couple of men vieing for her attention. There were always men around Polly. She was blonde and rather pretty, the daughter of a Benton storekeeper.

"Brace!" she said. "I didn't know you were in San Marcos."

"Didn't know you were here, either, Polly."

"Well, no wonder; I just arrived from Benton on that rickety stage."

"A visit?" he asked.

"A brief visit," she said, showing a sudden evasiveness alien to her, and left him, going up the stairs with a smooth undulation of hips that turned every eye in the lobby after her.

Ed Pitman, behind the desk, beckoned urgently to Brace, who shook his head and went down the long hall beside the stairs to the room he used when in town.

Luke Turner was straddling a chair there, tensely smoking. Two suitcases were on the bed.

"Brace, I found out who that woman was on the stage—"

"So did I. Get those bags open."

"But, listen—Creede's been running over to Benton frequent, of late, to see her. I don't know what it means, them meeting at Solari's—they must have, and maybe it's why he took the long way around to stop there—or why they're both here tonight in San Marcos, but he's not going to get Polly involved—"

"He won't. Let's look in the bags."

TURNER snapped their locks with a knife. "What we want isn't in them. I can tell by the heft."

He was right. They contained only Roy Creede's clothes and personal effects—the expensive gear he delighted in.

Wick Hibbard opened the door and entered.

"The Limited is running an hour late," he reported.

Brace relaxed. "Means he'll reach town, with no place to go. Luke, go find from that stage driver if he saw Creede at Solari's—in particular, if he was carrying anything beside these suitcases."

"Saddlebags!" Turner exclaimed, snapping his fingers. "That must have been it! He lightened his load by sending the suitcases ahead, but kept his saddlebags—a pair, probably, crammed full with the money!"

"Stay shy of Pete Muir," Brace continued. "He doesn't like us handling this."

"*Seguro!*" Turner said, turning to go. He paused, studying Hibbard with a goad-grin. "Wick, you better go back and watch the depot. That's a good job for you—just watching!"

Hibbard looked down at the carpet.

Brace brought out a shellbelt from a dresser drawer and buckled it on. It supported an open-end basketweave holster. He put a Colt .45 in it. The holster swung loose. Hibbard watched him.

"You mean to get him, yourself," he said slowly.

Brace did not answer. Hibbard rubbed a hand over his face.

"Well, you've sure got enough reason," he went on. "I guess everybody knew about him and your wife—but you. Creede and her, behind your back, all the time . . . hell for me, after the way you picked me up and set me on my feet, but how could I tell you? How could anybody—"

"Forget it, Wick," Brace said, voice brittle. "Go back to the depot."

"Yeah. But listen—Creede got me to teach him a cross-draw, and he's blue lightning with it. Turner can match him on an even break. Much as I hate that loud-mouthed kid, I got to admit it. I don't have the guts to face Creede. And you wouldn't have a chance. You've got to jump him, with your gun already in your fist. Don't give him any break at all!"

He went out. Brace remained a few moments longer, bitterness deeper than gall in him as Hibbard's words about Creede and Laura continued to ring through his thoughts. Why had it taken him so damnably long to find out?

He shook himself and went into the hall. There he came face to face with his wife, who was just turning the knob of

a door across from his.

The monumental shock he felt was mirrored in her face. Laura Renning—or was she, still? It was the first thing he asked, the thing he had to know before anything else:

"You got the divorce?"

She did not answer, and he interpreted her silence as an affirmation. Laura was thinner; she looked tired, drawn. But there was still the dark, quiet beauty that had twisted his heart the first time he had seen her, when her father had come to inspect the Golconda before buying most of its stock. If there had ever been another woman, anyone to give him some experience, it might have been different, all the way—but there had been no one, before or since.

Well, they had known a year together, and much of it had been all he could ever have desired.

He said, "It was easy to get free from me, I suppose? I signed the papers you sent—"

"Divorce is never an easy thing for a woman, Brace," she said, low-voiced. "It's like dying, but with only the pain, not the peace."

HE HAD known a lot of pain also, but didn't speak of that. She was a quiet, self-contained woman, and he wasn't glib; they had never been able to talk to each other freely, and couldn't now.

The way Brace still felt about her, and always would, was a grinding pain in him. That year they were together he had worked himself to the bone. He had been a young mining engineer, down the ladder at the Golconda, and her father was a wealthy man, Laura his only heir. But he wanted success on his own, not the easy promotions he could have for the asking. That had meant a constant grind at the mine, every day and most of the nights.

Many of those nights, coming home dog-tired and dirty, he had found Laura and Roy Creede together. More and more, as time went on, Creede was there.

Sure, he should have warned the man off, should have had it out with Laura long before the disastrous night when he came home to find her gone, a note left behind to say she couldn't stand it any longer. Ironically, it was the same day he had been made assistant to Dodge Phillips, the Golconda's boss.

But—Creede took Brace's orders; he had counted Roy his friend, and trusted him. As for Laura, he would sooner have put his hand under an ore stamp than suspect her of wrong behavior.

He had thought her note meant she couldn't stand the mine, with its loneliness, the stamps going all night. Brace had tried to quit, at once, and follow her, though he didn't know where she had gone. But Dodge Phillips was in a sudden bad tight, with trouble in the grinding mill at Ladera, and he couldn't let Phillips or the mine down; he had gone to that lonely, sun-blasted settlement to straighten things out.

Then the legal papers came from California, and by then he had the feeling it was hopeless. The times stigmatized divorce, but not for the wealthy; if she wanted freedom, let her have it, in spite of the hurt in him that wouldn't die.

At the mine, or in San Marcos, gossip would have told him the truth quicker; as it was, he had learned just in time what people were saying—that he was a blind fool who had let Creede wreck his marriage.

The man wasn't going to enjoy any final triumph. Brace said grimly, "Laura, what are you doing back in San Marcos?"

She looked down, biting her lip, again not answering. Anger began to boil in him. If she had returned to Creede. . . .

Hibbard called urgently from the lobby, "Better come out here, Brace!"

He had to go. A hurried backward glance, crossing the lobby, showed him she was no longer in the hall.

MANUEL SOLARI was on the walk in front of the hotel, brandishing a long-barreled gun. Tears streaked his fat cheeks. "Tell me where this Creede

is, that I may kill him!" he said, in choked Spanish. "I did not know he was at my place until he had gone. He gave Dolores a hundred dollars, and left her. A hundred dollars—and she has tried to cut her wrists. He had promised he would marry her, because she must have a husband. . . ."

Pete Muir appeared, and took Solari's gun. "Manuel, come with me, *viejo,*" he said gently. "I've got a place where you can rest a spell."

"No!" Solari said. "Señor Pedro, this is too much shame for a father to endure! Let me go, for a small matter of minutes—"

"It's never any good, that way," Muir said. "Come on along, Manuel."

The marshal gave Brace a long glance, then, mouth tight and eyes smoky, "Got an added reason, now, to take him myself. You remember what I said!"

Brace remembered Dolores, a pretty, shy girl who waited tables at Solari's place. Was there no depth to Creede's infamy?

Turner came along, in a great hurry. "Creede's here, Brace—left his horse at the Star Livery and went away . . . hauling his saddle-bags!"

"Get to the depot, Wick," Brace said. "Luke, you hunt through the alleys. And —*tenga cuidado!*"

Take care. He was remembering that cross-draw Hibbard had taught Creede. The man had always been fascinated by guns; he was good in their use, very good.

Polly Lawton appeared. "Wasn't that old Solari, Brace?"

"Yes." He didn't want to discuss the incident with her. "And a friend of yours was just here who'd be glad to say hello, with any encouragement—Luke Turner."

Polly grimaced. "That swaggering, tough-talking lout!"

"He's a nice boy, plenty solid behind the tough act he puts on," Brace said. "A little steadying, he'll make a good man."

"He's only another gunslick, liable to get himself killed any minute," Polly said. "I'm sick of his kind, sick of Arizona. You don't know what it's like, Brace, to see the poor run of men that a girl has a chance at here, while the years run out. I'm twenty-five; I'm sick of waiting! And I'm going to do something about it—"

She caught herself, turning away. Ed Pitman appeared. "Funny; she only wanted a room to freshen up, left her luggage at the desk," he muttered. Then, "Brace, I tried to tell you a while ago that your wife is here—"

"Saw her, Ed." He went along the hall once more—had to talk to Laura again, if only for a moment, and tell her what Creede had done.

SHE had taken a two-room suite, the same one they had occupied together, briefly, upon returning from their honeymoon. The way the hotel ran, there was a window where the hall ended, and the living room of Laura's suite jutted out a little, in an extension, with another window at a right angle there. Hand on the knob of her door, Brace found himself looking through those two windows, into Laura's living room. Roy Creede stood there, facing her.

He was dust-floured, had those saddlebags slung over a shoulder, head bare, tight yellow ringlets plastered down by sweat. There was a wide, pleased grin on his handsome face; he was talking fast, with gestures.

Laura was standing rigidly. She shook her head. Creede advanced toward her, showing that amused, debonair confidence that so many successes with women had put in him.

Brace lifted his gun, tried the door, found it locked. He put his shoulder against the panel in a savage burst of strength. The lock tore out of wood, and he lunged through.

Laura faced him alone, pale as death; too late, Brace remembered there was a street door, also, on the far side of the room. He strode toward it. She tried to get in his way, crying out at sight of the gun; he thrust her aside.

The street was empty. He yelled, "Luke!"

"Yo;" Turner came out of an alley

across the way.

"He was just here. See anybody running?"

"Heard somebody on the walk. Likely heading for the depot. I'll hunt that direction."

Brace turned grimly back. "Laura, did you write Roy, agree to meet him here tonight and go away together on the Coast Limited?"

Her dark eyes dilated and her cheeks showed a stain of indignant color. "I did not! I didn't even know he was in San Marcos, until he pushed open that street door and walked in—"

"But he did ask you just now to leave town with him?"

She nodded jerkily. "Yes. I told him no—the same answer I've given him in the past; it isn't the first time he's asked me to go away with him."

Brace stared at her, thoughts tangled. The ring of truth was in her tired voice.

"I was already on the coast; why should I come here to meet him?" Laura said.

He hadn't thought of this, and it stoppered his anger in an instant, turned his thoughts in a new direction. The meeting hadn't been planned, then. Creede must have been passing by, on the street, had glimpsed her through a window and had entered, in his bold fashion, asking her to ride the Limited west with him.

Laura said, with sudden flaring bitterness, "If you had only shown this sort of anger when it might have helped! All the times I had to push him away—that smiling, persistent man with his wheedling ways, knowing how lonely I was, and trading on it, wearing me down . . . I thought at first you didn't know, Brace. Then I thought you didn't care."

This startled and humbled him. "Laura, I didn't even begin to know, until a day or so ago."

And now it was too late. She was no longer his wife. But it wasn't too late to deal with Creede.

"In the beginning, I admired you for the trust you put in the men working for you," Laura said, low-voiced. "Then I saw it could destroy you—"

HE FELT uneasy, confused. Nothing figured right, somehow. Why had Creede gone the long way by Solari's, to fob off a girl he had wronged? That sounded more like a man tidying up his back trail than one on the run from a killing, with a big chunk of stolen money. And coming on to San Marcos, to walk Fort Street openly, which didn't fit at all the actions of a man carrying a burden of guilt.

For that matter, it just didn't make sense for one who had killed and stolen from the Golconda to ask a woman whose father was the mine's chief stockholder to go away with him. Murder wasn't something you could hide from behind a woman's skirts, no matter who she was.

Brace suddenly had an overpowering hunch. "Laura, I've got to go out for a few minutes. Will you wait for me here—"

"I could," she said. "I spent a year waiting for you, Brace . . ." Then her glance flickered to his gun, and she cried, "No! You're not going after him! That's one reason I came back—the fear that I was wrong in what I was thinking about you, and it would come to this! And he's faster than you, a better shot!"

"He isn't going to get to use his gun," Brace said. "Just wait!"

He left by that side door. Going past the hotel lobby, he looked inside, and was not surprised to see that Polly Lawton wasn't there.

The square was the one place in San Marcos most convenient for a meeting. Brace went for it, his hunch growing stronger. Beyond the dusty willows, by the drab little stand where a band played on Saturday nights, he heard their voices. Polly's was frantic, protesting. Roy Creede answered her with cool toughness:

"—just changed my mind, that's all. Maybe I decided I didn't want such a choosy woman as you, telling me to go the long way around, by Solari's, and fix things up first with a gal who blabbed to you, who wasn't any better than she should have been, with any man—"

"That's not true about her, Roy, and I wouldn't have agreed to meet you here except you promised you'd do what you could for her. But—a hundred dollars—"

"Half of the pay I had coming when I quit the Golconda. You think I'm made of money? And you had to be there to check on me, make sure I paid off to her!"

"I didn't mean to be," Polly said. "That was an accident. And I still don't understand why you put your suitcases aboard but wouldn't ride the coach with me on here. Roy, was it because of something you've got in those saddlebags—"

He snapped, "Go on home, Polly!"

"No! I—I told people at Benton you were going to marry me. If you leave me here, the whole territory will be laughing at me. I can't stand that, Roy! You've got to take me along!"

"Sorry, but it's no dice."

Brace was going on tiptoe now, gun out. Polly said bitterly, "There's some other woman! Who is she?"

"Never mind!" he told her roughly.

"I will mind! Is it Laura Renning? Then you're a fool! She'll never go with you. I saw her. It's plain she's still in love with Brace—"

"Maybe—but she doesn't belong to him, now," Creede said. "She'll go with me tomorrow, the next day; there's plenty of time to argue her into it, soon as I finish some necessary business. And I'm through gabbing with you."

Then he started to twist, frantically, but Brace was on him, gun grinding against his spine. "Stand still, Roy!"

Pete Muir was coming at a run from the saloon block. "My prisoner, Brace! Don't do anything foolish!"

"Sure," Brace said. "I just want these."

He reached for Creede's saddlebags, and the man fell back a desperate step, trying to fend him off. Brace took them. Their weight was astonishing. He laid them on the ground, pulled straps, and snapped a match.

SOME sawdust spilled out. The bag was crammed with it. And, in among the sawdust, bits and chunks and scrapings of gold, a lot of it. No wonder Creede hadn't taken the stage at Solari's and had run from Laura's room. He had been dodging the possibility of anybody discovering what he carried. Give him another couple of minutes, now, and he would probably have the bags sealed and stowed in the depot's express safe, beyond anybody's prying until he was ready to leave town, if nothing had happened at the Golconda last night.

"Why, he's only a damned high-grader!" Muir said.

Brace nodded. He had caught a thief, all right, one who must have been stealing every since the day he went to work at the mine, piling the stuff up, waiting for the moment when he had reached some figure he had set for himself, then quitting and leaving with it, almost at the same time the paymaster had been killed and thirty-five thousand in greenbacks taken. But Brace's hunch had been right. Creede wasn't guilty of that act.

Maybe it wasn't so coincidental, either. Likely, somebody had seen him leave, had known through furtive spying what he was carrying off, and had seized at the chance to take the payroll, knowing Creede's abrupt departure gave him a good chance to get away with it.

Brace stood, dusting his knees. Creede was rigid, cheeks lined, thinking of Yuma prison, perhaps, and the disastrous end to his cleverness. "You grabbed him, Pete, not me," Brace said. "The mine has a standing reward of five thousand for high-graders. Think Solari's daughter might get it?"

"Sure. Give me those bags for evidence," Muir said, and nudged Creede. "Start walking!"

Polly was leaning against the bandstand, weeping. Brace patted her shoulder. "Polly, don't. He isn't worth one of your tears. If it had worked out the way you wanted, he would soon have abandoned you. . . ."

She dabbed at her cheeks. "Women can be most awful fools, where some men are concerned. I knew he was no good. I didn't like what I knew about Dolores,

didn't like myself for agreeing to go with him, in spite of that. But . . . I couldn't seem to say no. Laura could. She ran. I wonder where Luke is? I want to see him before I go out to Solari's."

"Wait here and I'll send him to you," Brace said.

Then a single smashing gunshot shattered the night's drowsy quiet.

Brace spun and ran toward the sound. The Limited whistled on the curve, above town, on time. A fast-built tissue of lies, all the way, with the added strong nudge of Brace toward Creede—hoping, probably, there would be another killing, with things more tangled, more time to get away. That train only paused at San Marcos, and reached Yuma before morning. Let a man head south along the river, there, into the delta country, and catching him would be almost impossible.

THE train's headlight revealed Luke Turner, down in dust and weeds. The boy had both hands clutched to his side, blood seeping between his fingers, a look of angry amazement on his face.

"Right under our noses, Brace. How could we have been so stupid? I thought he'd found Creede and grabbed his saddlebags. I yelled at him, and he shot me."

"He hated you, boy, meant that as his last act here, maybe," Brace said.

"Damned if I rawhide anybody again, ever!" Turner muttered.

Polly came at a scurrying run, settled in the dust and lifted Luke's head to her lap. He grinned at her. "Why, honey, I'd get shot any time for this!"

Brace went on to the depot, running through a swirl of smoke and steam along the platform. He remembered what Laura had said, about putting too much trust in the men who worked for him. Creede wasn't the only one who had profited by that. A fast horse to Ladera, that money with him, all the time. . . .

He saw him angling across the platform, saddlebags over shoulder, as Creede had carried his, reaching for a coach grabiron.

"No good, Wick!" Brace called. "It's all over!"

Wick Hibbard swung toward him.

"Brace, I wish you hadn't found out," he said. "I liked you, still do. This is a poor return for all you did for me, but I couldn't stand lean living any longer—"

Brace had set himself, hand poised above his gun. "Drop the bags and lift your hands, Wick."

Hibbard smiled. "Now, Brace, you know you can't beat me to the draw!"

He was right. The first shot was his. It hit Brace somewhere around his right hip. He did not even attempt to draw. Instead, he used the only gun-trick he had ever learned; his own hand, slapping the butt of his Colt, tilted it, and he fired through the holster's open end. His bullet smashed Hibbard solidly, in the chest. Brace saw the man's brief look of amazement, before he buckled and pitched forward, dropping his saddlebags. Hibbard sprawled on them, and one burst open.

Brace was down himself. People came. He saw Pete Muir giving him a surprised, unbelieving shake of his head before going on to push the crowd back.

Then Laura was there, kneeling beside him. "Brace, hold me! You mustn't die!"

He liked the softness of her breast against his cheek, the trembling hands that caressed him. "I won't, Laura. Think I'll go back to working for Dodge Phillips's job, but taking my time, not in such a hurry—depends on you, though—"

"How?" Laura asked.

"Marry me again," Brace said.

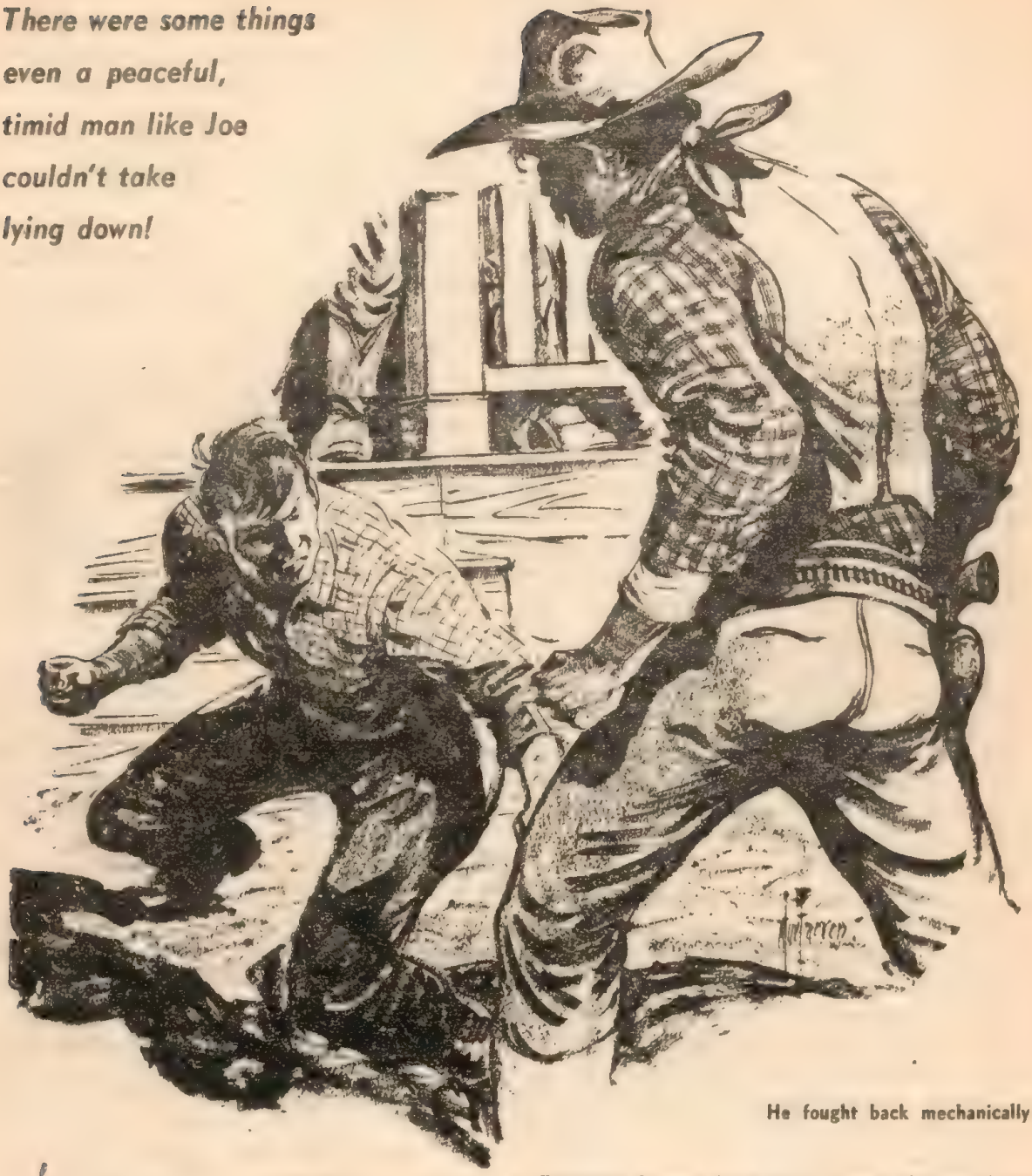
"I can't do that," Laura told him.

"You will!" he said, starting to struggle up. "I'll never let you go! I'll follow you. I'll be twice the gadfly Creede was!"

Laura smiled mistily. "I'm almost tempted to let you, but I still can't. Because I didn't get a divorce, Brace. I couldn't. That was the other reason I came back—to try again. . . ."

The touch of her lips against his, then, was shy, questioning. Brace kissed her fiercely . . . and prayerfully. They would both try again. And a man sometimes got a second chance, but never a third. He would make this one good. There would be no more parting between them—ever.

There were some things even a peaceful, timid man like Joe couldn't take lying down!



He fought back mechanically

As a Man Should Be

By JOSEPH HORSTMANN

THE horse had long since finished its drinking and was patiently waiting for its rider to remount. But Joe Blount dallied longer by the stream, drinking again slowly, though a nagging dread kept telling him to mount and ride south a little before it was too late. The Arizona dusk was settling over everything, making it soft and shapeless, and if he left now the two approaching riders wouldn't recognize him.

But Joe Blount didn't leave. With a mulelike stubbornness, he stayed crouched by the stream and began cleaning his new gold-rimmed glasses. Slowly and deliberately, he splashed a little water over the sore scabs circling his left eye, trying his best to be unconcerned. But beneath his forced calm his desire to ride off grew stronger.

The feeling twisted hard in his stomach till it made him even more tired, sick and disgusted with himself. Riding south a little, or north a little, or east, or west—avoiding your enemy, always avoiding, till it got a man so miserable that he felt like something that crawled.

He finished cleaning the glasses and fitted them on. The soft scabs hurt as the metal rim pressed against them. Then Joe Blount stood up and faced north, a short, wiry man with sun-browned skin who looked a little too tired and worn for his thirty-seven years.

In the soft, purplish haze, the approaching riders looked like any two men riding homeward peacefully. Blount swallowed. He wondered what it would be like if only later tonight he could tell his family he'd got the loan from Johnathan, the banker, that everything was all right now, that they hadn't lost their land.

And then to sit around the kitchen table with its warm, glowing kerosene lamp, drinking hot coffee, laughing with his wife, Laura, kidding seventeen-year-old Jim about the pretty girl over on Butler's ranch, helping the small ones with their school work, living peacefully and quietly. Weary, Blount reached for his horse's reins and watched the riders draw up across the stream.

A SICKENING nervousness went through him when he recognized Big Barney Chisholm and his younger boy. Big Barney was the largest cattleman in the Arizona Territory and he hated nesters harder than most cattlemen. Blount watched Barney come across the stream and felt glad he hadn't ridden south to avoid the meeting. At some point a man had to turn and make a stand, no matter how feeble.

The heavy-set cattle king looked contemptuously at Joe Blount. "Still tryin' to make a go of farmin' out in Yalpais Valley?"

Joe Blount looked silently at Big Barney and his son. He didn't answer.

Barney leaned forward on his pinto. "Still think it'll do any good to see Johnathan?" He was smiling ironically, as though he couldn't understand why any man was willing to fight against such odds.

A lost, hopeless feeling went through Blount as he mounted. Johnathan was a fair shooter, took things at their real value, but he'd become a banker handling cattlemen's money. He'd have to go along with cattlemen's sentiments. Still, Johnathan had asked him to come in and talk about the loan. Too sick and miserable inside to bother answering, Blount tugged tiredly at his reins.

Big Barney reined across his path. "Only fair to warn you. Gat Palmer's in town. You know my foreman told you last time never to come into Sundown when he was there."

Barney's words dug deep into Blount's mind and humiliation came up as he remembered walking along Sundown's main street one month before. Gat Palmer getting in his way, accusing him of trying to start a fight. Then the numb, stunned flash where his glasses had smashed into his left eye after Gat had hit.

"Has he got your orders again to hit a man without warning him or telling him to take off his glasses?" Blount asked drily.

"I never told him to beat anybody!" Barney retorted.

Blount's humiliation mounted when he recalled staggering up, unable to see through the blood streaming over his eye, praying that none of the broken glass had entered his eye, and then feeling the sledge-hammer blow land again. Going down, too dazed and groggy to do anything. Other cattlemen watching, some approving, others just watching silently, doing nothing as Gat mounted and rode

off. *This is cattle country, nester, get out and stay out!*

"But anyway," Barney continued, "what's done is done. I can see to it that he never bothers you outside of town. But if you insist on goin' into town on a hopeless trip, I can't be responsible for what my foreman does."

"That's the way it is," Blount said softly to himself and started reining away.

"Look, Blount," Barney reasoned, in an exasperated tone, "why'n hell don't you be sensible and clear out. I got nothin' against you personal, and like I said, I never told Gat to beat you the way he did. But you're a nester and this is cattle country and so long as you're a damned nester, I'll fight you every way I can!"

JOE BLOUNT thought about that. Why didn't he just clear out? As simple as that. A man trying to make something for his family, a home, a little ground for crops, security. There was enough land for everybody—if they shared it. But there it was. *Clear out!*

"Thanks, but I gotta go on into Sundown. This time I'll have my glasses off when Gat gets close." The remark sounded a little silly and weak, like some child whistling near a dark cemetery, but Blount was glad he'd said it.

"Damned fool!" Barney muttered, disgusted. "Don't listen to nobody. Go ahead and get your block knocked off!"

Joe Blount gently spurred Blackie and started toward Sundown. All along he'd been telling himself he had to go into Sundown to see Johnathan, but now he knew it was more than that—a whole lot more.

For the past weeks he hadn't been able to look directly at Laura because of eleven stitches on his face. He hadn't been able to look at his children, at seventeen-year-old Jim, because always in the back of his mind the same message kept hammering out. He wasn't man enough to take care of himself, he wasn't man enough to take care of his wife and children. So here he was now, going into Sundown, particularly while Gat Palmer was there. A forlorn, hopeless feeling joined Joe Blount as he rode on toward town.

Presently the lights of Sundown glimmered out across the dark land and Joe Blount saw a buckboard rumbling toward him. He pulled over and was about to pass when his heart jumped at what he saw. His son, young Jim, was sitting, bloody and bandaged, next to Mort Manners, a small cattleman from over the bench.

Joe Blount halted the wagon and stared at his son's beaten face. Before he could ask any questions, Mort spoke up softly. "Gat Palmer. Said the kid nudged him on purpose. Before any of us could stop him, the damage was done. Sorry, Blount. I'm a cattleman and I have to go along with general sentiments, but this sort of thing turns my stomach. Some of us boys hopped in and stopped it but then it was too late. Sorry, Blount."

Joe Blount sat there, a solemn, implacable man, too on in years to feel a burning rage. But what had just happened to his son had happened to him and he was feeling the pain and humiliation just as surely as though he had been cut and bruised by someone's fists. This is too much, he thought. What kind of animals were the cattlemen that they'd beat a helpless seventeen-year-old boy so brutally. If I could kill every one of them I'd do it, he thought.

"I'll take him on home, Blount, 'cause I'm figurin' you gotta go on in now."

Mort's voice snapped Blount's attention back and he felt ashamed for his last thought. Nesters and cattlemen were battling, but certain cowmen drew a line and wouldn't pass beyond the limit. Like Mort. He was an easy-going man who accepted things in his stride, but he had to be on the cattlemen's side because that was his living.

"How do you feel, Jim?" Blount asked, avoiding Jim's eyes.

The boy had a hard time talking. "I'm okay, I guess. I went to Sundown to save you the trouble of seeing Mr. Johnathan. He can't give you the loan."

JOE BLOUNT sat still, staring at his battered son. The boy had known about Gat's warning. He had purposely tried to save his father from coming into town—and had been horribly beaten for it. That was it. There was no loan. No crops. No homestead. Nothing! All that was left was his young son sitting before him, bloodied and battered. All that was left was Laura sitting at home waiting for news about the loan, sure that everything would work out somehow, someway. That's all that was left.

Joe Blount saw red. Blood red. The only thing left to do now was go crazy, lash out, in wild, blind hurt. He had to bash at his tormentors, he had to make Gat's thick, ugly face look as battered and bloody as his own had looked—the way his son's looked now. If it cost him his life he had to bash back just once, for seventeen-year-old Jim, for Laura. Just once.

Mort looked down as though a little ashamed. "I would never do anything like this, Blount," he said softly. "There's others who wouldn't too. We're not all like Gat."

"Will you be all right for a while, Jim?"

"I'll be all right, Dad."

"Tell Laura I'll be home soon."

Blount nodded and dug his spurs into Blackie's sides. The horse surged forward under the painful jab. Realizing what he was doing, Blount eased up on the animal and headed toward Sundown's main street, hot blood whipping through him.

When he came up the main street he saw people along the boardwalks motion to one another. Four cattlemen, Blount recognized, stopped their idle talk before the Arcadia Barber Shop and started south, following him from the sidewalk.

One cattleman said, "Hi, Blount. How're things at Yalpais Valley?"

Joe Blount looked at the man. Roy Hornsby was a good friend of Mort's, but Roy had never said a word to him before.

Blount said, "Fine," and rode on down the street.

He reached Sundown's only saloon a few minutes later and dismounted before the hitching post. A handful of cattlemen chatting on the porch eyed him quietly, speculatively.

Joe Blount stared back at them feeling fear grinding through his loins. He wondered what each of them might be thinking. In his slow and deliberate way, Blount took off the gold-rimmed glasses he'd had to get from Doc Wendler after Gat had broken the other pair and carefully placed them in his saddle bag. He stood still, detached, with grave sunken cheeks, eyes squinting a little to see the men on the porch. "Will one of you tell Gat I'm here," he announced slowly.

"Sure thing, Blount," someone answered, and disappeared through the batwings.

Seconds passed. A half minute. A full minute. From out of nowhere men gathered on the porch. Their faces were only vague blurs to Blount as he stood waiting.

SUDDENLY the batwings swung open. Though Blount couldn't see the man's features clearly, he knew it was Gat Palmer. The flapping batwings and Gat's footsteps were the only sounds. Everything else was still.

"I thought I told you to stay out of Sundown whenever I was here!" Gat boomed.

The threat in Gat's guttural voice knifed into Blount's mind. His hands were sweating and he rubbed them along his pants legs. Blount wished he could talk softly and evenly, but little spasms convulsed his chest and he was afraid they would sound in his voice.

"Come down," Blount blurted quickly, feeling his arms beginning to quiver. He had never fought before, didn't even know how. But he had to fight now. Everything in his whole body was forcing him to.

"Ah, I'll let you go this time," Gat said as if bored, turning back to the batwings.

Blount saw someone step between Gat and the batwings. The man was a good head taller than Gat and a lot heavier. "He doesn't weigh as much as you do, Gat, but he weighs a heap more'n his son."

Blount watched Gat shrug and turn away from the batwings. The squat foreman paused and hooked his thumbs through his gunbelt. "On second thought, I reckon you came here just lookin' for trouble, Blount. So I'm gonna give it to you."

Blount stood still, ready and erect, feeling fear slamming through him as he watched the foreman start down the steps. But it was fear tinged with determination. It felt gratifying to stand up to a tormentor and finally get a chance to bash at him.

Blount clenched and unclenched his fists as he listened to Gat's spurs jingling softly while the man came slowly down the steps. If only he didn't go down right off. If he could only stay up long enough to bash Gat's thick, ugly face just a little. For young Jim, for Laura, for everything the cattlemen had done to him. He watched Gat reach the bottom of the steps.

The next thing he knew Gat was hurtling toward him. Then something like a sledge hammer slammed into his temple and swirling specks exploded before his eyes. He went sprawling backward and down.

He landed in the dirt, stunned and hurt, feeling warm blood streaming over his right eye. The imprint of Gat's fist burned hot like a branding iron on his temple. It was the same place Gat had hit him two months ago when he'd been wearing his glasses. Blount shook his head and wiped at the blood. He got up slowly, fear still pounding through him.

Gat circled slowly and easily, his arms poised in confidence. Suddenly he was rushing in again, aiming a hard sweeping right toward the cut eyebrow.

Instinct took over for Blount. The nester side-stepped quickly and with all the strength he could gather, sent his fist into Gat's eye. Blood splashed down Gat's face and the man went stumbling sideways. He sprawled in the dirt and for a few seconds sat there like an upset bull, more surprised than hurt. Gat wiped at his forehead and stared at the blood. Then a cold smile twisted his lips and he came to his feet. He hunched up, tightened his fists and eyed Blount. "Now I'm really gonna get you, nester!"

BLOUNT stood waiting, a fierce pride in his tight chest. His own face was bleeding, was hot and flushed, and yet it didn't matter, he had taken and he had given. He had cut Gat's face just a little for his son's beating, for his own.

Gat came rushing in again, fists swinging. Blount knew enough to keep away from the heavy-set foreman. He circled around quickly, trying to keep out of range, afraid and bewildered, not knowing how to punch through Gat's defensive arms. He fought back mechanically, swinging and dodging, immitating what he'd seen other men do, but without really knowing why.

Then Gat caught him again over the eye and Blount went down, more blood streaming over his face. Blount shook his head again, wiped at the blood, and came up.

Another hard blow came crashing into Blount's face and everything seemed to get a little gray. The big beefy fist came through again. Specks swirled up and everything grayed a little more. The fist

Coming in Next Month's Issue

DEADWOOD DETAIL

A Novelet of Indian-Fighting Cavalrymen

By STEUART EMERY

landed again and again.

Blount went down on his knees and started falling forward into a welcoming gray haze. In numb horror, he pushed out his arms and held on. He couldn't go down. He couldn't! Something dragged him up. He faced Gat once more, only to go down again.

Again he held himself up with his arms, fighting hard against the gray haze. He had to hold on. Young Jim was all battered and bloody. Laura and the children were waiting for what news he could bring them. No loan. No loan! The cattlemen had seen to that. He was being beaten into the ground. He had to get up and fight on. If it cost him his life, he had to bash Gat's face.

Joe Blount came up.

Gat closed in, panting and snorting. But Blount wasn't afraid anymore. In a daze and heavy and tired all over, Joe Blount started fighting back. No more retreating. Just going in. Shaking away the tormenting fists.

Gat backed up slowly, giving ground reluctantly, lashing out with hard, defensive fists. Blount bore in. Mad. Madder than he'd even been in his whole life. His legs felt like heavy trees. His fists and arms hung like granite from his side. But Blount bored in. Mad. No more retreating.

One long sweeping blow slammed into Gat's nose and more blood splattered over the man's swollen face. Gat stumbled back, a crazy baffled look in his reddened eyes, swinging ineffectively. The punches he landed were not hurting Blount anymore. "Go down—damn you—and stay down!" Gat rasped between huge sucking gasps, lashing out weakly.

Blount caught Gat again with a blow that jolted the man's head back. After that, Gat lifted his arms and half covered his head.

SUDDENLY, with the sight of Gat staggering and covering himself, a flash of understanding broke through Blount's fogged mind. Gat was deathly tired, just as tired and weak as he was. But he was more than that; he was scared! Scared of someone who should have gone down long before and stayed down. Gat had given his best and had nothing left. Now he had lost courage. He was through.

A strong flush of hope started churning through Blount's heaving chest, through his hopelessly pounding heart, through his wobbling legs, and down into his granite-heavy arms and fists. With a last reserve of energy, Blount closed in and brought his right smashing toward Gat's pummeled face. He saw the man feebly trying to duck when the blow slammed against his gaping jaw. Blount staggered back for just one more swing.

Gat's arms dropped and he stood staring stupidly through glassy eyes. "Don't!" he blabbered.

From somewhere far off, Joe Blount heard dim voices murmuring. They grew louder. Winding his body around completely, Blount sent his last punch slamming straight and hard into Gat's face. Then he stood there wobbling, knowing he had to put everything into that last punch, knowing he couldn't lift his arms again if his life depended on it.

For a few seconds Gat just leaned against the hitch rail. Then he slipped down into the dirt. He tried to lift himself, but collapsed. He rolled over, groaning. "No nester—can—do this—to me!" he stammered, quivering for air and stupidly fumbling for his gun.

Blount stood there, bloody and battered, sagging, not even having the strength to go toward Gat to stop him.

Then Blount saw someone step up to Gat and yank away the gun.

Blount felt his legs start giving way. He staggered to the porch steps and slumped down. He wanted desperately to just stretch out and go black and forget everything, but he fought to stay conscious so he could look at Gat; look at his battered, bleeding face. Blount thought he felt good, but was too tired and battered to know. He just sat, staring at Gat.

Then hands were helping him to sit up straight and Blount saw several cattlemen gathered around him.

One puncher hollered out, "One of you boys go fetch the doc for Joe Blount."

Blount stared up through blood-smeared eyes, too tired and worn to say anything. Cattlemen were trying to comfort him a little. The cattlemen who had been against him for so long had hollered for the doc for him. And they were gathered around him, not around Gat Palmer.

"He sure hides a heap o' fight under his calm, don't he?" someone commented.

THEN Big Barney Chisholm was standing over him, frowning. Gat's gun was in his hand. For a long time the cattle owner just stood and stared hard at the bloody nester. Presently he said, "Followed you to stop any fight, but when I passed your son—"

Barney looked down at the gun in his large hand and turned toward Gat. "Any man'd beat a boy like that ought to be hung outright!" Barney pulled a roll of greenbacks from his pocket and peeled off five bills. He threw them toward Gat who was now sitting up and groaning weakly. "Get out of this section soon's you're patched up!"

Barney turned back to Blount and stared hard again. "Don't get me wrong, Blount. Still got no love for nesters. But when I'm wrong I try to fix it pronto. Since you're such a stubborn mule, I reckon you would've worn me down to a stump if I had to keep fightin' against you. For my money, you just fought your way into Yalpais Valley for keeps.

Barney stood silent once more and just stared hard at the nester. "Have the doc bill me for you'n young Jim and when you get around to seein' Johnathan, tell 'im I'll stand behind whatever you need." Barney scowled and walked away.

Joe Blount sat in the middle of the punchers and waited for the doc. Someone handed him a cigarette and Blount dragged on it gratefully.

He was already figuring out how he'd word the good news when he saw Laura, figuring out how he could look her straight in the eye despite his cuts and bruises; look her straight in the eye and know he'd been man enough to take care of everything. Joe Blount dragged slowly on the cigarette. He was already feeling like a man who didn't even need a doc.

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THE YELLOW BRAND

a novelet by ART BAKER

CHAPTER I

Into the Jaws of Hell

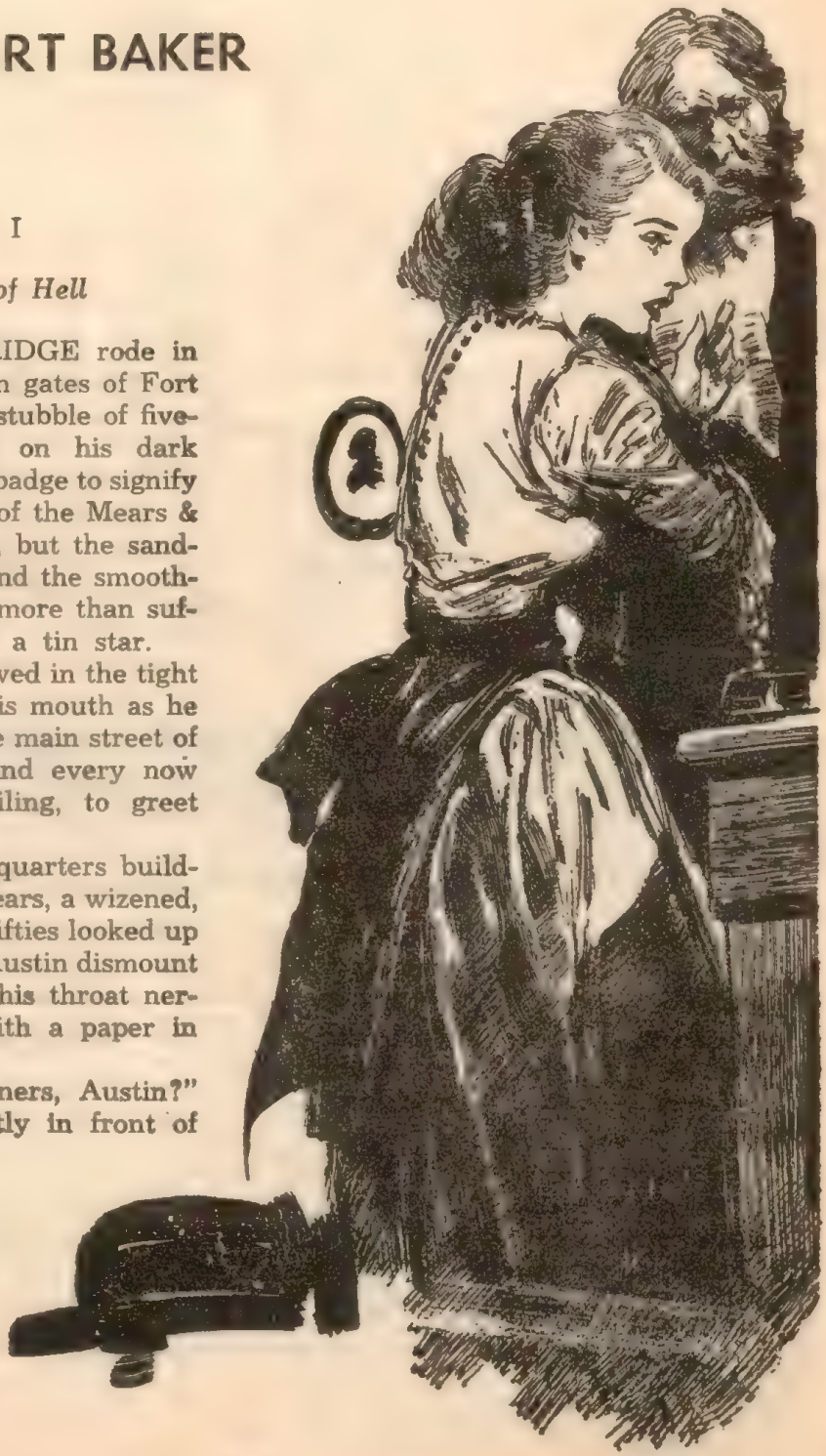
AUSTIN DAINERIDGE rode in through the open gates of Fort Mears with the stubble of five-days' growth bristling on his dark young face. He wore no badge to signify his position as marshal of the Mears & Kelly Land Association, but the sandstone gray of his eyes and the smooth-worn butts of his guns more than sufficed in the absence of a tin star.

He was angry. It showed in the tight pull to the corners of his mouth as he loped his horse down the main street of the fort, raising his hand every now and then, without smiling, to greet people he recognized.

The door of the headquarters building was open. Henry Mears, a wizened, balding man in his late fifties looked up from his desk to watch Austin dismount and enter. He cleared his throat nervously, and fidgeted with a paper in front of him.

"You bring no prisoners, Austin?"

Austin stopped directly in front of



His fist lashed out and slammed to Austin's jaw

The Daineridges were always proud of the name, and when the old man showed yellow, it was a pill too bitter for young Austin to swallow

the desk, legs spread, thumbs hooked through his crossed gunbelts. "They put up a running fight. When it was finished, there wasn't any prisoners to bring back."

"Hmmm. I suppose not." Faded blue eyes regarded Austin from behind small lenses. "And the cattle?"

"The boys will find 'em by riding down White River to the fork. I counted a hundred and ten, but they was scattered some by the shooting. Now, if you haven't got any more questions, Henry, maybe you'll answer a couple of mine." Austin's voice carried a sharp edge and his eyes were anger-bright under dark brows. "I rode past some of your farmers on my way in. They told me you sent my dad and Jim Bell into the Iron Jaw Mountains. Is that true?"

Before Henry Mears could reply, a door opened from an adjoining office and a tall young man stepped into the room. He was coatless, the sleeves of his striped shirt caught up with fancy blue garters around his upper arms.

"I couldn't help overhearing what you said, Austin." The tall man smiled. "Congratulations! That herd of cattle would have been a great loss to us."

"If you heard that much, Dave, you must have heard the rest."

"About your father and Jim Bell?" Dave Kelly walked up beside the chair of his partner. "I don't understand the reason for your concern, Austin. Blue Daineridge and Jim certainly wouldn't have gone into the mountains if they'd considered it too dangerous."

HE SMILED a little too easily, Austin thought. His mustache was trimmed too nattily over a mouth too delicate to be trusted, and his brown eyes were so soft they almost looked effeminate. If there were not plenty of other reasons, Austin would have disliked Dave Kelly just on account of his dandified good looks.

"My dad signed up as Captain of this fort of yours, "Austin said shortly, "and he takes an oath like that serious. He went into those mountains because you ordered him to, and for no other reason. Jim Bell went because he's got a habit of following Blue around. That's their reason for going. As for my worrying about them, I made myself clear on that point when you first brought up the idea of exploring the Iron Jaws."

Henry Mears spread his hands on the desk top. "But, that's our land, Austin! We have a legal grant to those mountains! Any fool can see the Indians are trying to keep us out of them because they have something valuable there. Gold perhaps—fertile valleys!"

"Sure they got something valuable in those mountains!" Austin retorted, "Their homes! I reckon old Chief Clato figures he's got a claim to those mountains a sight more legal than yours, Henry, and he's got one thing we lack—the force to back his claim! Clato offered to keep the peace so long as none of our people trespassed into the Iron Jaws. Gents, thought you played it real smart taking up this claim west of Commanche territory where you thought you'd be safe, but Commanches are just feathered darlings compared to these mountain Apaches! You've brought how many people out here with you? A hundred and fifty—two hundred? Well, I hope they're every one of 'em standing at the gates of hell when you two wolf baiters drop through! And I hope they got their scalps in their hands to remind you how you threw their lives away for the chance to grab off a few more stinking dollars!"

Austin swung on his heel and left.

He rode to Jim Bell's house—a frame home at the head of Main Street, just inside the gates of the fort. Piling from his saddle, he tramped between the tiny, pink-blossomed cactus plants that bordered the path leading to the porch. There he paused, taking a deep breath to blow the froth from his anger before rapping on the door.

"Is that you, Dave?" a girl's voice called from inside as his knuckles tapped. "Come on in."

Austin thumbed the latch and let its inward swing carry the door out of his hand. Jody Bell turned solwly to face him. A stack of sheets in her arms tumbled

into an open chest.

"Austin!" she exclaimed in consternation. "I—I thought—"

"I know what you thought, Jody," Austin replied. "Dave Kelly's busy figuring up his profits at the moment, but I reckon he'll be along directly. I just learned they sent your dad and mine into the Iron Jaws—thought I'd stop by and see if you could tell me any more about it."

"Austin! Oh, I'm so relieved! You've been gone so long!" She came quickly toward the doorway, her blonde hair glinting in the sunlight as she moved. "Don't just stand there like that, Austin!" She put her hands against his denim shirt and looked up at him with blue eyes full of understanding for the stubborn resentment in him and for the harsh tone of his voice. "And don't think what you're thinking—please!"

Austin closed his hands about her wrists, gently. Over his stern young face broke a half-smile. "I didn't mean to take it out on you, Jody." Pride would not allow him to fold her in his arms as he once would have done. Dave Kelly had changed all that. About Jim Blue. When did they leave, Jody?"

SHE pulled him inside the living room and made him sit in the chair beside the adobe fireplace.

"Now," she said, "that's more like it. Daddy and Blue left a day after you rode out to chase those rustlers. They should be back in a week maybe." She dropped onto a hassock at his feet and cocked her head to one side to look up at him. "Can't you relax around me any more, Austin? Honestly, it's as though you're mad at me. At everybody, for that matter!

He avoided her eyes, looked over her head toward the open door. "Mears and Kelly sure didn't waste any time taking advantage of my absence, did they? I'd never have let 'em send Jim and Blue into the mountains, and they knew it." His lips took on a bitter slant. "How you going to feel about marrying the man who sent your dad out to get killed, Jody? That's just as sure as we're sitting here right now."

"Oh, Austin! Aren't you taking yourself too seriously? How could you have stopped them from going? After all, Dave and Mr. Mears give the orders around here!" She was on her feet suddenly, bright spots of anger flushing her cheeks. "Dad and Blue Daineridge are capable of taking care of themselves. They got along quite well all these past years while you were away fighting Mexicans and being a Texas Ranger, or whatever you were doing!"

"It seems you all got along pretty well," Austin told her. "But we haven't got time to argue that over again. We got to get this fort ready in case Chief Clato ain't satisfied with just butchering his two captives." He rose and walked to the door, looking out into the hot, dusty street. Bitterness welled up in his throat and he dug his hands into the pockets of his faded jeans. "Hell, it ain't worth savin'!" he said thickly. "There's just one thing I'd like to do right now. I'd like to swap Mears and Kelly for our dads—let them take the Apache treatment, the dollar-grubbing sons of Judas!"

"Don't talk that way, Austin!" Jody cried. "You frighten me. I—I know you're just trying to be like your father, but you don't have to try so hard to prove you're a Daineridge!"

He spun to face her. His mouth dropped open and anger choked his throat. But his voice came low.

"Just what are you driving at, Jody? You might as well get it out! Now is a good time for unloading the things that've been eating you ever since I come back last winter."

"Daineridge!" she cried. "That's what's been eating me! The way you act as if that name was a badge of courage, or something! Nobody else can be as brave as a Daineridge, or as good! You've worshiped your father since we were kids, and Blue is a great man—but ever since you won those medals in the Mexican war—and—and that silver belt buckle from the Texas Rangers, it's as if the name of Daineridge has become so exalted

that the very sound of it should make people bow and scrape, should make your word law everywhere you go. Well, I want a man, not a god, Austin! Even your father has seen the change in you!"

Austin stared at her, his face turning a bright red under the five-day growth of black whiskers. Anger was not so great as the hurt her words had inflicted, and a sudden selfconsciousness was both overwhelming and strange to him. He felt unable to reply, because of embarrassment, and the confusion of his thoughts.

"All right, Jody," he finally said. "Daineridge is a good name. I don't have to defend it to you or anybody else."

He closed the door behind him, stepped down from the narrow porch, and pulled a deep breath into his lungs. He shook his head to try clearing the muddle from it. As he mounted, he heard the door open. Jody called to him in a distraught voice, but he put his horse into a lope and turned down Prosperity Street toward the three-room home his father had built.

CHAPTER II

Only One Scalped Victim

AUSTIN DAINERIDGE poured himself a stiff drink, than took a cold bath in the oak tub. He had another drink while he waited for his shaving water to heat. Jody didn't know what she was talking about. He couldn't make sense of all the crazy things she'd said. If anyone had changed, she had. Four years and Dave Kelly had changed her.

She had been just sixteen, three years younger than himself, when he'd left home to fight the Mexicans. In the intervening four years she had been dragged from their homestead back on the Sabine River, where the two of them had grown up and their mothers had died, to this desolate frontier, and subjected to the persuasive talk of a city dude. That was enough to joggle any girl out of her senses.

In the four years she had grown to be a lot more beautiful, also, and chances were she knew it only too well. Her letters had given him no indication of all this, however, and he found the realization of the change in her a hard pill to stomach.

Austin had finished shaving, and was just drying his face when a noise that broke out in the street brought him up sharp.

"Austin!" somebody shouted above the tumult of other excited voices. "Daineridge! They're acoming! Injuns!"

He grabbed his shirt on the run and slipped into it as he spurred his horse up Prosperity Street. Men had already shut the main gates and dropped the barring timbers into place. Austin swung from his horse onto the ladder and scrambled up to the battlements.

The road leading out of Fort Mears crossed a small mesa and climbed sharply upward toward Needle Gap, a narrow opening in the rocky outcroppings of the Iron Jaw Mountains. Just outside the gap Austin saw the apaches. He could not make an accurate count, but he could tell it was not a war party large enough to be bent on attacking the fort.

Faintly he could hear their shrill whooping and chanting. Bright objects were flashed in the sunlight. The Indians rode around and around in a small circle for ten or fifteen minutes, keeping up their noise and their sunflashing. Then they drew back through Needle Gap.

Nearly everyone in the fort was gathered on the parade ground as Austin climbed back down the ladder. Dave Kelly was issuing weapons from the blockhouse, a sorry collection of antiquated rifles and muskets that would hardly slow the first wave of an attack. Austin raised a hand to quiet the upsurge. He felt sick inside, but he did not let it show on his face or in his voice.

"You won't need the guns for awhile," he told them. "Bring up a wagon. I'd like a couple volunteers with strong stomachs."

"Austin!" Jody pressed through the crowd to him. "You don't think—"

He nodded. "If I know anything about Apaches at all, we'll find Jim and Blue up there at the gap. You better get a good grip on yourself, Jody."

He held her eyes for a moment, watching pain in them deepen as full realization struck her. He tried hard to keep the I-told-you-so from his tone, but he knew that with this tragedy facing them she was bound to remember the spiteful things she had said to him, adding remorse to her grief.

"Take it brave, Jody," he murmured. "Your dad would want that."

A swath cleared in front of the gates as the heavy hinges creaked. Two men were on the seat of a wagon coming across the parade ground, and five more were mounted and waiting by the flag-pole. Austin told them to leave their weapons.

"If it's a trap," he said grimly, "we wouldn't have a chance anyway, and there's no sense letting 'em make off with our guns. We'll be in less danger if there's only four or five of us, and with nothing along to make us worth killing."

He selected one of the mounted men, and was about to point out another when Dave Kelly insisted on going along.

"It's going to be kind of lonely up there, Dave," Austin told him.

DAVE made no reply but ordered one of the men to dismount and took his place on the horse. When the others had disposed of their weapons, Austin removed his own gunbelts and handed them to Jody. He stuck one of his revolvers inside his shirt.

"You can't stop many Indians with that," Dave said, reining his horse around so that he met Austin's eyes.

Austin looked him up and down for a moment. He buttoned his shirt with the gun inside. "You ever seen the look in a man's eyes when the Apaches have left him to linger with maybe an hour of life left?" He kept his voice low so that Jody could not hear. "I ain't taking this gun to finish off any Indians with." He lifted his reins and rode ahead of the wagon. "Let's go, boys!"

A few yards in the lead, Austin could hardly keep his horse down to the pace of the heavy team. Dave Kelly rode on one side of the wagon and a gray-haired blacksmith on the other. It seemed like hours crossing the mesa and almost as long again climbing the slope to Needle Gap.

Just inside the opening, where shade from the towering rock walls on either side of them made the air cool, they found what Austin feared they would find—except that there was only one body dumped squarely in the middle of the trail. Searching the surrounding area turned up nothing else.

It took them several minutes to identify the corpse, but a few locks of hair clinging behind the ears established Jim Bell's identity.

"They got him to running," Austin explained gravely, "then rode up alongside and did this job on him."

The Apaches loved to scare a man into breaking from cover and running, and it was impossible for a man to stop once he started. The Apaches would have him stripped naked in a quarter-mile, and then they'd drive him barefoot over the thorny trail and through deadly patches of fishhook cactus and cholla, hacking and clubbing all the while, and finally turning him over to the wiles of their squaws when he could no longer crawl.

"Maybe if any of you get to hell soon," Austin added, looking squarely at Dave Kelly, "you'll know a little of what Jim went through."

The marshal helped them roll the remains in burlap and load it into the wagon. There was no need for the revolver inside Austin's shirt. He mounted his horse again and sat staring up the trail that angled along the slope of Lobo Peak to a point where it leveled off and turned out of sight.

Somewhere back in those mountains he knew his father was down behind a boulder, or a clump of brush, with an Apache lance sprouting from his vitals. But Blue wouldn't have run the way Jim had. The Apaches were probably riding back to

mutilate his corpse, but Austin knew they would have to step over the bodies of a lot of their own people in getting to him. Blue would have died like a Daineridge. There was some comfort in that.

Perhaps Blue had told Jim Bell to make a break for it if he thought he could get through, but all Austin could think of now was Jody's grief, and the effect it was bound to have on her, once she realized that the evidence of her father's cowardice was only too damning. Jody would have to live with the memory of that the rest of her life. She had been so proud of her father, in spite of his drinking too much and following at Blue's heels like a meek puppy for the past fifteen years or so.

Dave Kelly cleared this throat, hesitated a moment, then said, "We'll organize a party to go in and find your father's body, Austin."

"You're just plumb set on donating scalps for Clato's lodge pole, ain't you, Dave?" Austin shrugged. "Even if we knew where Blue made his stand, which we don't, by the time we got there we wouldn't find anything to bury except maybe what the wolves aren't quick enough to get at." He swung his horse about, glanced up at the men on the wagon seat. "All right, boys, let's get her turned and headed back."

WHEN they were out of the gap and headed down toward the mesa, Dave said, "I'm sorry, Austin."

"Yeah—I wouldn't be surprised."

Dave glanced at him sharply, then swung his horse away and rode back to speak to the blacksmith.

A moment after he called, "We're riding out to warn the farmers, Austin! Tell Henry I'll be at the fort in an hour or so."

Austin turned in his saddle and nodded. He watched the two men rein off the trail and ride north across the mesa. His contempt for Dave Kelly reached a new low at that moment. He felt quite sure Dave would not show up at the fort until Jim had been buried and the edge was worn off the people's anger. Maybe Henry Mears would feel a little of what Blue Daineridge had felt when his partner ran out on him.

CHAPTER III

The Dead Alive

WHEN the party reached the fort, Austin was well in the lead. Riding onto the parade ground he forced a clearing for the wagon. He wanted to say plenty about that corpse in the blanket being Chief Clato's reply to the peace Mears and Kelly had broken, but Jody was in the crowd. He couldn't bring himself to hurt her any deeper, even if it would have been good for the people in Fort Mears to know where the responsibility lay.

Henry Mears held the people back from the wagon. The drivers had explained that Jim Bell was no fit sight for human eyes.

Austin saw Jody running away, and caught up with her as she was stepping up to her porch. Neighbor women were trying to console her, but Austin scattered them, put his arm around Jody and helped her to the door.

"Don't come in with me, Austin," she begged him. She was dry-eyed still, but the daze was beginning to wear off. "Stay here close, but—but please don't come in. I—I'm going to be sick—and cry—and all kinds of crazy things. But when it's over, I'll need you, Austin."

Her hand slid from his. She went inside and closed the heavy door. He heard her shoot the bolt. Then the blinds came down over the windows.

Dust rose above the parade ground where people and horses were milling. Austin sat on the Bells' porch and began rolling a cigarette. They were hauling Jim's body into Carson street toward Doc Kimble's hospital to be wrapped for burial. The wagon disappeared between the buildings, with people strung out in a solemn procession behind it. Soon the

parade ground was clear and a dry breeze from the south began thinning the dust from the air.

Austin struck a match on the juniper upright beside him and lit his smoke. The cigarette didn't taste good and he held it out in his fingers to inspect it. Then he shook his head and let his wrists bend over his knees. His eyes lifted to the mountains, gray shimmering in the summer haze.

Blue must have known the chance he was taking. He had honored his oath as Captain of Fort Mears, and he'd taken only Jim Bell with him because he had known the fort couldn't afford to lose a single fighting man. He'd died like a Daineridge. It was something in the blood. Pride of family, as he had always said, made it easier to live with grief.

For the first time, Austin clearly saw the value of a heritage such as his own. A lot of hardships could he connected with living up to a code like that, but it gave him strength, stood by him when he needed it, and in the final tally would help him destroy his enemies by the sheer weight of right.

Dave Kelly proved that. Because Blue had held honor and courage above life, Dave was now in the position of having ordered him and Blue to their deaths, needlessly. And Dave not only had lost the respect of the people of his settlement, but he had lost all hope of winning Jody for a wife. Austin doubted she would ever speak to the man again, or even remain at Fort Mears any longer.

One thing, however, kept nudging uncomfortably at Austin's conscience. Did he want Jody if he had to win her this way? If only Jim hadn't turned yellow and run for it! That complicated matters for Jody was proud, too. She would probably feel indebted to Austin because her father had deserted his so tragically. He might never know if she loved him, or simply yielded because she did feel indebted.

Austin frowned. Damn cowardice! It tainted the lives of everyone near enough to get the stench of it in his nostrils!

TEXAS TOPICS

A rancher in Big Spring, Tex., has donated about $2,500,000 to church institutions.

No question about 'em growing big in Texas. One Spanish lady in the town of Ballinger gained 160 pounds in 3 months, going from 240 to 400 pounds.

Maybe men don't scare in Texas but pigs do. One turned white from fright recently in Austin.

It could only happen in Texas, of course, but a Hereford calf was born out there—in the town of Canadian—with two heads, two tails and six legs.

By Sam Brant

THE buckskin wandered over to tug at the black-tipped grama grass at the edge of the cactus border. Austin rose and threw an arm over the mount's sloping neck, fondled one of the tawny ears. At the sound of the approaching riders, he turned to lean both elbows on his saddle and gaze over his horse's back. Dave Kelly and the blacksmith came through the gate at a high canter.

Dave swung his horse in toward the porch. "I'd like a word with you, Daineridge," he said.

"Nothing short of lockjaw going to stop you, Dave."

"I'll be in my office."

"Then you'll have to talk pretty loud,

because I'm going to be right here."

Dave's mouth hardened. "I advise you to drop this attitude, Daineridge! I said I would be at my office, and I'm asking you to come there immediately."

"Miss Bell asked me to stay right here. She wants me close by." Austin flipped his cigarette into the dust. "I think maybe you've given your last order to a Daineridge, Kelly. Now go wipe your nose before I pull you out of that saddle and put the boots to you."

A smile worked across Dave's face. A look of cunning pinched at the corners of his brown eyes.

"I was going to be decent about it," he said, swinging his horse about.

He looked toward the gate as Austin became aware of the sound of more incoming riders. The horses were coming at an easy lope. When Austin recognized a farmer named Charlie Gaines a good bit in the lead, he knew something important had happened to pull Gaines off his farm work this time of the afternoon.

Suddenly a hole opened under Austin's feet! His fingers froze upon the saddle-horn.

Blue!

Austin's father came riding into the fort with Charlie Gains and his two boys! Alive! The four riders loped on down Main Street toward headquarters. Austin heard his own breath sigh out of him, a hoarse, trembling sound, and he swallowed the dry squeeze out of his throat.

Dave Kelly put his horse into motion without looking back. He caught up with the riders and went with them toward his office.

"Austin!" Jody cried sharply as she went out the front door. "Wasn't that Blue? Austin! Wasn't it?"

She was at his side, her hand clutching his arm. Austin saw the dark circles under her eyes and the inflamed lids. He made no reply. His hand closed over hers and they headed for headquarters so rapidly that Jody was nearly pulled from her feet.

The door of the main office was open. Austin drew Jody to a stop a few paces short of it.

"No—no, now," they heard Henry Mears insisting. "We've got to have a better report than that, Blue. You were responsible. Of course, you understand that, and I'm certain you can give us a good account of the manner in which you executed that responsibility. I mean where Jim was concerned—an explanation for our annual report to the Government. Something that sounds reasonable, Blue."

Dave Kelly cleared his throat, "That wound, it's in the *back* of your leg, isn't it Blue?"

"What's in the back of my leg isn't near so important as what's in the back of your mind right now, Dave," Blue told him. Austin recognized the raw edge of anger in his father's voice. "You're both good men. That's why I've let you call me a liar and get away with it. But now I'm asking you dead serious not to do it again! Here's the way it happened. One more time. Then I'm going over to see that Jim gets the kind of burial he always wanted."

It was silent in the office as Blue settled himself. Austin felt Jody's hand squeeze his, but he didn't look at her—he couldn't! Knots were twisting inside of him. Blue just had to have an explanation for this! He wouldn't have deserted Jim in a run from the Apaches—Austin was sure of that—but still he hung on the forthcoming words with the paralysis of impending tragedy.

BLUE said, "Jim and me were following a stream up a sharp ravine about thirty, forty miles west of the gap. We could see plenty color in the gravel. The slopes were thick with juniper and them quaking asps, so our view wasn't too good. Jim was a little excited by the gold. I guess I wasn't watching too sharp myself, but I know I spotted the Apaches before they caught sight of us. I've had a lot of talks with old Chief Clato the last couple years, and I know a little about the Apache by now.

"Well, I figured they were onto us being in the mountains, but they hadn't

seen us yet, and I pulled Jim back into a little rincon cut under the rocks on the wall of the ravine. We were covered by a thicket of chaparral and turkey bush. We eared our ponies down, naturally, and clapped our fingers in their nostrils so they couldn't give us away, and I'm dead sure if we'd waited right there them Apaches would have moseyed on up the ravine past us and never noticed a thing. I could see Jim wasn't so sure as me. He figured the Indians had seen us and were playing it badger until they was right on top of our hiding place.

"Well, Jim knew his Indians, too, only he hated 'em so bad I think he sometimes let his feelings get mixed up with his good sense. The closer they came, the tighter Jim got. Maybe he was right—I guess we'll never know. Anyhow, when they was passing right in front of us, he jumped on his pony and lit out. Nothing for me to do then but follow."

"Jim was in front of you?" Mears interrupted. "In other words, you were between Jim and the Apaches."

"That's right. Jim busted out of that thicket yelling like he was the devil hisself. Guess he figured that might startle 'em some and give him a little lead. They had their ponies turned by the time I hit the trail, and I wasn't more'n twenty yards to the good. I knew the Indians were on fast mounts. Them paint ponies of theirs can overtake just about anything on a mountain trail. So I kept firing back at them—shooting high. The last thing I wanted was to draw the first blood between them and the settlement, especially since old Clato and me had been on good terms. That would have kicked a hole for sure in the peace he promised us.

"Well, they caught up to me first. I used my rifle butt to club at the ones closest to me. An arrow caught me in the back of my leg and that stopped me just long enough for one of 'em to lay the flat of a tomahawk across my head. When I woke up I was laying beside the trail. The arrow was out of my leg and the hole tied with a rag. My horse was tethered there, too. I had a lump on my head, that's about all. I was still some leary about following the open trail, so I doubled back around Lobo Peak and come down at the Gaines place. That's where I heard about what happened to Jim."

"He sure didn't know nothing about Jim when he rode in on us, Henry," Charley Gaines observed. "You seen that, Dave. You was there."

"Hmmm." Mears's chair squeaked as he shifted about. "You mean to tell us the Indians just knocked you unconscious, bandaged your wound, and then tied your horse there beside you?"

"I don't know," Blue replied. "That's how things stood when I come to."

"But," Dave argued, "they rode on and caught Jim, butchered him, skinned him alive you might say, then left him out there on the trail for us to find. How do you account for that, Blue—the difference in their treatment of Jim?"

"I can't, Dave, no more than you can."

"Maybe the Indians know you're Sam Houston's friend," Dave suggested, but with a noticeable lack of sincerity in his voice. "Maybe they know you believe in his friendly policies toward the Indian tribes of Texas."

"Not likely," Blue replied. "And you know it ain't, Dave. I've told my story. I'm no liar. I like you men, believe in what you're trying to do here. But don't make me out a liar! I couldn't stand by and let you do that."

CHAPTER IV

The Shame of Cowardice

JODY tried to catch Austin's hand, as he turned away, but he withdrew it quickly. She called after him in an anxious whisper. Austin kept walking. He felt weak and shaky. A cavern of despair and shame had opened up inside him and he felt like slumping down into it. The dark emptiness echoed with whis-

pers of his own voice, taunting echoes of all he'd proudly said about the Daineridge honor to Kelly and Mears that he would now have to swallow every time he looked into their eyes. All his own grand thoughts were suddenly cold ashes in the pit of his stomach.

And Jody! How the tables had turned! Well, anyway, he woudn't have to worry about her accepting him because she owed him a debt! A tight, crisp laugh erupted from him.

Austin shoved through the door of the commissary. It was empty. The storekeeper had evidently gone with the others to attend Jim's funeral. Austin went behind the counter and got a jug of Valley Tan and a tin cup. He placed them on the counter, then sat on the tall stool, his back resting against the 'dobe wall and poured himself a drink.

After awhile a quick scab began crusting over his hurt, a hard shell of cynical contempt that made it possible for him to laugh at his father and himself. Daineridges!

He contemplated what might actually have happened back there in the mountains. Likely his father and Jim Bell had been scouting opposite walls of the ravine. Blue could have seen the Indians first and lit out on his own, not taking time to warn Jim, leaving the Apaches a prize to work on while he made his own escape. The arrow had caught him from behind. That certainly blasted any notion of a courageous stand with a fight to the finish!

Austin poured another drink. A lot of things could have happened, but one thing was sure—the Apaches hadn't knocked Blue unconscious, bound his wounds, and left his horse tied for him. That yarn deserved a laugh! Blue should have practised his lying a bit more before he tried building an excuse to fit this sorry occasion.

Whatever really had happened, the details were unimportant. The fact that Blue had run out and left Jim to the savages was all that mattered. Austin broke out laughing. Where was that Daineridge pride now? Blue had shown their yellow, and here was his son getting as drunk as Jim Bell had ever got!

But Austin sat with the jug for nearly an hour without ever getting really intoxicated. Somehow the liquor would not dissolve the adamantine crystal of his thoughts. When the commissary door burst open, his eyes were still clear and he saw Blue framed in the doorway. Jody was at his father's side and a lot of people directly behind them.

Blue strode up to him. The handsome, sun-darkened face of the elder Daineridge fixed a glare of scornful rebuke on his son. Blue's hand swept out suddenly, smashing the jug and the tin cup to the floor!

"Are you a rat, that you got to find a hole to crawl in?"

Austin met his father's eyes. Obviously Blue thought he was drinking on account of his sorrow over Jim's death. Austin smiled sardonically.

"I don't have to find any hole," he said. "I'll just use the one you dug for us."

The deep anger in Blue's eyes wavered. Puzzled, he stared a moment, then slowly the meaning of Austin's words reached through. Breath seeped from him slowly. His shoulders seemed to fall as the wind went out of his lungs.

"You!—"

HIS voice choked off. His anger rekindled on the fuel of Austin's accusation. The strong teeth clenched, and it seemed his graying mustache bristled. Color flooded to his features. Suddenly his fist lashed out, swinging with all the weight of his big body! It slammed to the base of Austin's jaw, spinning him off the stool! He crashed to the floor, sprawling into a corner behind a barrel of pickled meat.

Austin shook his head, pushed himself to a half-sitting position and looked up into the face above him.

"I don't expect anything from you I wouldn't expect from the Apaches," he said, his own anger mixing with insinuation to raise his voice to near a shout. "Just bandage me up now and let me

sleep if off. That's the way the Indians do it, I hear!"

A shudder passed through the big man. Anguish twisted across his face, and abruptly he turned and pawed his way out of the commissary. Austin got slowly to his feet, brushing dust from his clothes.

Jody caught hold of his shirt front. "Austin! Oh, don't do that to him! You're wrong, Austin—you must be wrong!"

He did not put his hands on her. "You know I ain't wrong!" he said. "What kind of daughter are you?—buying a coward his peace of mind at your own dad's expense? Jim Bell died like a man. It ain't easy earning the right to have folks say that about you. For God's sake, leave Jim his full share of honor! And leave us Daineridges at least the right to face up to our shame."

Charlie Gaines pressed forward as Jody began sobbing against Austin's breast. "He's your dad, Austin, but he's my friend! You'll never see the day you're the man Blue is. If there's any yellow in the Daineridge family, it just crawled outa that corner behind the meat barrel!"

Austin lunged, pushing Jody away from him! His hand closed upon Charlie's vest. Instantly the two Gaines boys were beside their father. Eyes bored into Austin, challenging. He let go the farmer's vest. Not that he feared these men. He figured he could handle the three of them, but it just wasn't worth it any more. There wasn't any reason to fight—wasn't anything to prove.

Austin Daineridge made his way out the door of the commissary. He saw Dave Kelly in the crowd outside. Their eyes held for a moment, Austin reading all the contempt in Dave's expression.

"All right, Dave," he said finally. "Blue cooked the crow, and I'm eating it. But you take care of her, Dave. You do her one bit of dirt and I'll ride you down if I kill a dozen horses doing it!"

With that, Austin forced a way through the crowd. He found his buckskin, hauled up on the cinch, mounted, and loped out of the fort. Those who watched saw him cross the mesa and go up toward the dread shadows of Needle Gap.

Beyond the sheer red cliffs, the wagon-wide trail continued at a gradual incline, Pine trees and junipers shaded the steep mountainside to his right. To the left the ground fell away sharply into a gully where Lobo Creek trickled along through a tangled bed of fern and *Vino ramo.* Across Lobo Gulch, to the south, the low foothills rolled their sunburned backs under a sparse growth of live-oak and spiny ocotillo.

Austin kept his buckskin in a gentle pace along the climbing trail until he came to where the ledge jutted far out above the gully of Lobo Creek. He paused on the wide point to look south over the tops of the foothills. The Dog Lick River was like a shiny blue wire twisting through the dun-colored prairie far beyond. This point in the trail was the boundary which Clato had set as the limit for settlement folks.

AUSTIN checked his pistols, then drew his rifle from its scabbard and held it at ready in the crook of his arm. He walked his horse along the trail which leveled now under overhanging boulders that gave some protection from above.

Deep afternoon he reached the fork where one leg of the trail followed the turn of Lobo Peak and led into the heart of the mountains. Austin kept to the straight leg which continued west through Devil's Head Pass and out of the Iron Jaws. A big redrock formation which hung precariously from the crags, looking much like an evil face leering down upon the trail, had given the pass its name. When Austin rode under this, he knew he was safe from the Apaches.

The following evening he was in the Border town of Ballard, a journey that would have taken a week or more if he'd skirted south of the foothills as travel went these days since Clato had proclaimed the Iron Jaw Mountains out of bounds for all whites.

Upon his arrival, Austin learned that Mexican bandits were ravaging the vicinity again, and that the sheriff would not

be back in town for a couple of days. He debated riding on down to Fort Durram at the mouth of the Pecos River where it emptied into the Rio Grande, but common sense told him the Texas Rangers stationed there would be out on this bandit war, too, and he must get in touch with them. He had to send them to the aid of Fort Mears. But he would make contact with them sooner by remaining where he was, so he took a room at the Ballard Hotel and turned in at once, too exhausted to undress or get under the covers.

Sleep did not come as easily as he expected. He'd heard a lot about a man having too much time to think, but now he figured that was nonsense. If a man had things on his conscience, he was just naturally going to think about them.

He wasn't angry any more. There was a heap of regret inside him, a sorry kind of sickness that kept him awake and made him a sour kind of man whom folks would leave alone, but he wasn't bearing anyone a grudge. He pitied Blue. There wasn't much left in this world for his father now.

Austin couldn't help feeling a little guilt for having run out on Blue, but if he'd stuck around the fort there would have been a lot of mean words between them. It was cleaner this way. Better to cut it off quick. That went for Jody, too. He couldn't sincerely say Dave Kelly was welcome to her—he wished that milk-bellied dandy had stayed back in the East where he belonged—but he did hope Jody would be happy and well-cared for. Dave was the most likely one to do that for her.

That was Austin Daineridge's last thought before he dropped off to sleep.

CHAPTER V

A Kiss Conquers Pride

FOR the next three days Austin Daineridge tried to find out about the Indian situation from the Ballard citizens, but was told nothing that he considered reliable, so he switched to asking about the gold and silver strikes that had almost depopulated the town.

Folks were skeptical, but from letters received by the relatives of those who had gone to join the rush, it sounded as though in California was the most promising of the various mining strikes. That was enough to satisfy Austin. As soon as he could be assured of the safety of Fort Mears, he would find out for himself just how promising this California country was.

Sheriff McSwade returned with his posse of eight men on the afternoon of the fourth day. He was a big, raw-boned man with a look of dull stupidity on his jowled face. But Austin, who knew him well, was not fooled by the look.

"I wish you'd got here a week sooner, Austin," the sheriff told him. "We killed two of the sons, but—" he tossed his big hands and slumped into the swivel chair behind the desk—"there must been twenty or thirty got away, and they'll be back. It's Cortinas, and you know what that means."

Austin nodded sympathetically. "I thought we'd driven Cortinas off the border," he said, seating himself in the hide-bottom chair beside the desk. "You'll need more than a handful of possemen if he ever decides to come right out and take this town."

"That's sure the bone-hard truth!" McSwade exclaimed. "I wired Fort Durram. Don Edwards is due here with a company of Rangers first of the week. Cortinas aint much inclined to lock horns with the Rangers again, I'm hoping. But—" he squeaked forward and folded his hands on the desk—"I don't reckon you come here to talk about my troubles. What brings you away from Fort Mears? Is somethin' goin' on there 't needs help?"

The sheriff's remarks were the first knowledge Austin had that Ballard was now connected with the outside world by a telegraph wire. He had to rouse himself from the surprise and chagrin of this discovery to answer Sheriff McSwade's question.

"Clato," he replied, picking a long, twisted cigar from the clay bowl on the desk. "He's showed signs of making trouble. I thought maybe you'd have heard if there's any general unrest among the Apache nation, and I was hoping to get some help from the Rangers in case there was." He struck a match on the sole of his boot and lit the cigar.

McSwade blew out a long sigh that lifted the drooping ends of his mustache. "What next? I say, what in hell they going to turn up next?" He leaned back and clapped his hands on the arms of his chair, giving Austin a woebegone look which on his big, dull features was almost comical. "This is the crankiest damn piece of country white man ever laid claim to, and it'll be proof of God's good will if we ever hold it! What the bandits and the Injuns leave undone, the devil takes care of with weather straight out of hell." He pondered a moment, then added, "You better wire Fort Durram. They'd be the only ones to know about any Injun uprisings to the north in Apache country. Don might be able to recruit y'some help. He'd do it for you, Austin, if there was a way."

An hour later Fort Durram replied that Captain Donald Edwards was in the field and would be notified of Austin's request as soon as he returned. This news left Austin no alternative but to wait in Ballard. He joined McSwade on several forays through the vicinity following rumors of Cortinas's return, but they saw nothing. In fact, there was something strangely ominous about the quiet.

After a week, McSwade sent another message to Fort Durram, anxious over the Rangers' delay. Captain Edwards appeared in Ballard ten days later. He had six men with him. Austin and the sheriff were waiting for him in the town's main saloon.

"It's been a long time, Austin," he said, as he shook hands with young Daineridge. "Lord knows, I wish I could have brought you some help, but we've got a first rate war on our hands all up and down the Border. Cortinas has organized five or six bands. It's made us spread out so thin we're just barely able to stand our ground."

AUSTIN smiled at his old friend. "You don't have to apologize to me, Don. I know what you're up against." He pushed his empty glass toward the inner edge of the bar and signaled the bartender to serve the three of them. "Anyway, if there was any big Indian trouble brewing, you'd have heard about it, I suppose. How many wagons were in that caravan I heard had come from Fort Mears?"

"Four. They were commissioned to hire men and buy guns. Could be old Mears is a little previous with his worries. All we've heard for sure at Fort Durram is that a war party of Coyoteros burned the trading post at Cummings and killed a few folks. That could just be a local thing up there, I don't know. That's the trouble with the Apache—you never know."

"Did the wagon drivers tell you where they were headed to pick up their guns and men?"

"Eagle Pass. Laredo. Right on down to the Gulf until they got what Henry Mears sent them to get."

"How'd they act?"

"Worried. In a hurry. They wouldn't even lay over the night at Fort Durram."

Austin thought about it for a minute. Then he downed his drink and slapped a five-dollar gold piece on the bar.

"I can get through to Eagle Pass from here by telegraph, can't I, Mac?" he asked the sheriff.

McSwade nodded. "Sure. Eagle Pass, Laredo, even Brownsville and Corpus Christi. You ought to catch your wagon train somewheres along the way if that's what you're planning on."

Austin wired to four different points along the Rio Grande. Eagle Pass and Laredo reported seeing the wagons as they'd plassed through, pausing only long enough to buy what arms they could. The caravan had disappeared somewhere after leaving Laredo.

It was hours before a second dispatch from Laredo came through. The wagons had been attacked by bandits. Only one

of them had escaped and it had turned back, gone through Laredo a few minutes before the agent there sent the dispatch which Austin now held in his hands. Fortunately, that wagon had held most of the weapons and ammunition they had managed to purchase.

Austin hurried another wire to Eagle Pass:

> Intercept Mears & Kelly wagon. Advise that Austin Daineridge waits in Ballard to take wagon over short cut through Devil's Pass

It was after midnight when the dispatcher came sleepily into the Ballard Hotel bar with the message Austin awaited. The wagon had reached Eagle Pass. The driver would get another change of horses at Fort Durram. He would be in Ballard some time the following morning, and expected Austin to have fresh horses ready.

Austin turned in then. He would need his rest. If the Apaches had been only troublesome before, they would be really dangerous now. In a matter of hours—almost as rapidly as by the white man's telegraph—Chief Clato would know about the bandits' raid on the Mears & Kelly wagon train. He would know it had carried weapons for fighting Indians.

This all added up in Austin's understanding of the Apaches. A restless Clato would send scouts to watch any wagons leaving the fort. He would know one of those wagons was on its way back with a load of trouble for him.

A man would be taking a long chance to drive right through the Apache stronghold. But by going over Devil's Pass and through Needle Gap, he might get the wagon there in time to be of some value to the fort.

THERE was something else, too, that made the gamble worth taking. If he was successful it would take some of the curse off the name of Daineridge with folks at the settlement. And after he had gone again, it might make his father live easier with his conscience.

Austin was up at daylight A few minutes after eight, the wagon came around Seven Notches and into sight of Ballard. The horses were leaning into harness, raising a thick cloud of dust behind them. The wagon careened from side to side, gray canvas cover whipping from the wind.

Austin had the fresh teams ready. Folks were on hand to donate more guns and ammuntition, for the suspense and excitement of waiting for the wagon had blown the Indian scare into a full fledged massacre in their imaginations. None of them, however, volunteered to accompany Austin through Devil's Pass into the Iron Jaw Mountains.

The wagon rolled to a dusty stop in front of the sheriff's office where Austin had the harnessed horses waiting. Volunteers jumped forward to do the hitching. Austin raised his eyes to the wagon seat—and froze! For a moment he could only stare, unable to move or say a word.

"Picked her up in Fort Durram!" the driver shouted. "Couldn't talk it out'n her, Austin. She was just plain set on coming along with the wagon."

Jody climbed down from the high seat. She forced herself into Austin's arms and he could see the struggle against tears as she glanced at him quickly and away. Her cheek pressed his shoulder. Her small fists gathered into the back of his shirt.

"Austin!" she cried. Her voice was low and hoarse. "Austin, for the love of God, hold me! Hold me!"

Deep, twisted anguish in her voice reached him. So keen was it that her words stabbed through the barrier of conflicting emotions and struck hard at him where he kept his pride and hurt locked away.

A knot choked up into his throat. He didn't dare try to say anything. Instead, he caught her chin between his fingers, gently, tipped her frightened face back and kissed her with thoroughness in front of that cheering throng on Ballard's Main Street!

No matter what had brought her to him—pity, obligation, or even just the momentary hysteria caused by the Indian

scare, Austin knew he would swallow his pride somehow. Having her was that important.

It was important also that she remain in Ballard until the danger was past. But Austin learned something about feminine determination then, and he succumbed finally to the argument that she did not care to have her courage questioned by friends at the fort. He had no reply for that one.

"Into the wagon with you then!" he told her, "and hang on! You, Baxter," he said to the weary driver, "crawl in the bed and catch some sleep if you can!"

A minute later they were racing out of Ballard for the Stevens ranch, half-way to the Pass. Austin was sure they could get another change of horses there and be at the fort the following afternoon or evening.

CHAPTER VI

Race for Life

NOT much was said on the trip. All of them were too busy clinging to their seats through the mad pitching and bouncing. Jody did manage to tell Austin how worried Blue had been after he left. She told him how the Indians had begun coming nearer to the fort, how they'd killed a couple men who were hunting in the foothills.

Now they were coming in bigger bands, sometimes as many as forty in one bunch. That was why Blue had talked Henry Mears into sending the wagon down the Pecos trail to recruit men and arms. When she could stand it no longer, Jody said, she'd saddled and ridden out early one morning, heading down the trail behind the wagons hoping to get word of Austin at Fort Durram. She had been determined not to return until she had found him, and not to return then, unless he did. She had arrived at the Rangers' fort in time to catch the returning wagon.

The Stevens ranch gladly supplied them with fresh horses, but again no one was willing to make the trip through the Iron Jaw Mountains. Austin was called a fool for trying it. But he whipped the horses out of the ranch and toward Devil's Pass north of them in the black night which provided only the thinnest sliver of a moon to give them light.

Austin caught a few hours sleep during the early morning, but Baxter was near the point of exhaustion after his marathon drive up from Laredo. Besides, there wasn't much sleep to be had on the hard bed of the wagon with rifles for a pillow, and boxes of ammo teetering precariously every time the wagon hit a rut or a rock.

Jody spent most of her time on the box directly behind the driver's seat. She was beginning to show the wear of it all.

By mid-morning the mountains were looming high in front of them, and by noon they had reached the foothills. There they met Blue. He was driving an open bed democrat, coming as hard as the two bay geldings could run. When he saw them, he wheeled the democrat out of the trail. He had his team unharnessed by the time Austin reined to a stop beside him.

"Austin!" he blurted when he saw who was driving.

Then he leaped to the wagon seat and looked back into the bed, saw the rifles and ammunition. He told them he was making a run for the Stevens ranch and Ballard to get what guns and men he could for the emergency. The last two days the mountains had been alive with signal fires.

"Meet any trouble in the mountains?" Austin inquired, studiously avoiding any inflection in his voice.

"No," Blue replied, taking the reins from Austin. "I think they're holding a big pow wow west of Lobo Peak. If we hit hard, I think we'll get through without a hitch."

He smacked the reins across the horses' rumps and the wagon jerked ahead. In a few minutes they were making good time again. with Blue's team running hard to

keep up behind.

When they entered Devil's Pass, Austin made Jody lie down flat in the wagon bed. He stationed Baxter with a rifle beside the rear opening of the canvas cover. Austin sat beside his father, his own rifle ready and his eyes sharp upon the cliffs above and in front of them.

Father and son did not so much as exchange a word as they rode, both concentrating on the countryside, glad for the diversion. They didn't see a trace of an Apache all the way through Devil's Pass. It seemed that Blue's calculations were going to prove correct.

As soon as they passed the fork of the trail, however, and started upon the ledge above Lobo Gulch, all hell broke loose on them!

"Here they come!" Baxter screamed.

His rifle crashed and Jody started to spring up from the wagon bed. Austin shoved her back down. He leaned out to look back around the canvas.

"About fifteen, maybe twenty!" he told Blue.

THE Indians set up a fierce shrieking as they charged. Austin told Baxter to knock down the bay team. Baxter shouldered his gun and fired carefully. The two geldings fell, screaming and kicking. A moment later the Apache ponies came hurtling over their carcasses in the trail. The device didn't slow them more than a second.

Rifle slugs ripped through the wagon canvas, one knocking a chunk from the backrest of the seat, not six inches from Austin's ribs. An arrow whanged off the spinning wagon wheel near Blue and dug into the steep mountainside to their left.

Baxter was firing as rapidly as he could fix target, and Jody was loading a fresh rifle for him from the supplies. Once or twice Baxter cried out in triumph as an Indian spilled from his pony. Austin raised up and fired back over the top of the wagon, but the redmen were jouncing about so wildly that he could not aim.

"They're closing on us, Dad!" he shouted.

"Hold 'em, son! Hold 'em back just a couple more minutes! The point's just up ahead!"

Austin fired blindly then—anything to check the lead ponies. But he knew it was hopeless. Even after they'd reached the wide point and the trail sloped down, the Indians would overtake them before they could make Needle Gap. Then a thought struck an icy clot at the pit of his stomach! Jody! Would she understand if the Apaches caught them? Would she understand why when he leaned into the wagon bed and pointed the rifle barrel at her head?

Suddenly Baxter let out a scream that was not one of triumph! He slumped down to the wagon bed, cursing. A rifle slug had knocked a gaping hole in his side.

"Sit down here, son!" Blue ordered.

Austin dropped back to the seat, looking at his father questioningly. They were approaching the point of land where it widened and jutted out over the gulch of Lobo Creek. Then they were on it and the wagon was careening around the gentle bend in the trail.

"Take her in, son! I understand your feelings—and I'm damned proud of you boy! Remember that. Good luck!"

Snatching his own repeating rifle from the floor boards, Blue suddenly thrust the reins into Austin's hands, then he rolled over the side of the speeding wagon and tumbled to the ground! Austin had time to look back just once.

He saw his father roll hard a few times and come to rest behind a breastwork of boulders. Then Blue was out of sight, but his rifle could be heard cracking with a steady, deadly rythm. In seconds the wagon was out of earshot, plummeting down the trail into the gap and out upon the wide open sunwashed mesa. The Apaches did not get past Blue in time to catch up. . . .

The night passed somehow. Austin kept himself busy as he could. Everyone in the settlement had been called inside the fort, and Austin issued the new rifles to those who either had none or had only the antiquated issues from the blockhouse. He posted sentries and appointed officers,

giving them certain details to execute in case of attack. By working all night, he had the fort in readiness by dawn.

What they saw in the early morning twilight was almost a comical anti-climax to the night's labor and vigil. A lone Indian came riding down from the gap. He carried a white flag tied to the shaft of his lance, held above his head.

STOPPING his horse just outside the gate, the Apache raised his voice sharply, and spoke in Apache for several minutes. Then he hurled his lance into the ground and wheeled his horse to gallop back toward the mountains.

"They think we brought in some soldiers in our wagon," Austin explained. He knew the Apache tongue. "And a lot of weapons. Their messenger says there's been a big pow-wow, and Clato's ready to talk peace again with the white man. He says they'll allow a few of us to go out and pick up what's left of my father." Austin shrugged grimly. "I guess Blue knocked off quite a bunch of 'em there at the point. That flag bearer sounded mighty sore."

Every man in the fort volunteered to accompany him. Austin picked Charlie Gaines and his eldest son. He permitted Dave Kelly to join them. Dave, however, objected when Austin told Jody she could come if she would first dress herself in breeches and shirt like a man.

He felt sure that if Jody saw his father hacked and slashed beyond recognition, as her father had been, it would somehow square accounts and set them off on even footing again. Blue had straightened things out in his own way, and Austin could never feel ashamed anymore.

It was hushed in the mountains. Austin knew they were watched, but he also knew that Chief Clato was a man of his word. They would not be harmed. Approaching the point, Austin could see his father's body several minutes before they reached it. He steeled himself for the sight, but felt a certain pride, also, through his grief. No one could say that Blue Daineridge had not died a hero.

They found Blue lying on his back. Austin checked his horse abruptly.

"What in the name of—" he blurted.

Everyone else was staring, too. Blue's hands were folded peacefully upon his breast. Not only was his body unmutilated, but his clothing had been straightened! The blue neckerchief had been untied and spread over his face, each corner weighted down with a small white stone —the sign of respect for a man of great bravery! This was the way the Apaches laid out chiefs and high warriors.

Austin dismounted and knelt beside Blue. Tears rushed into his eyes. He had no right to claim this brave man as his father! The Apaches had proved his courage the only way they could prove it. His father had told the truth about Jim Bell! The Indians would not have treated him this way unless they respected and honored him highly.

Blue must have killed many Apaches as he'd held this position to allow the wagon to get through the gap. This fact made the evidence in front of their eyes stranger by far than the idea of the Apaches knocking Blue unconscious and binding his wounds after that scrap during which he had drawn no blood from them. Ironclad proof of the truth about that earlier incident was shown by the manner in which they had honored him in death!

"I—I want to apologize to you, Austin," Dave said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"You don't need to, Dave. Apologize to him. That's what I'm doing."

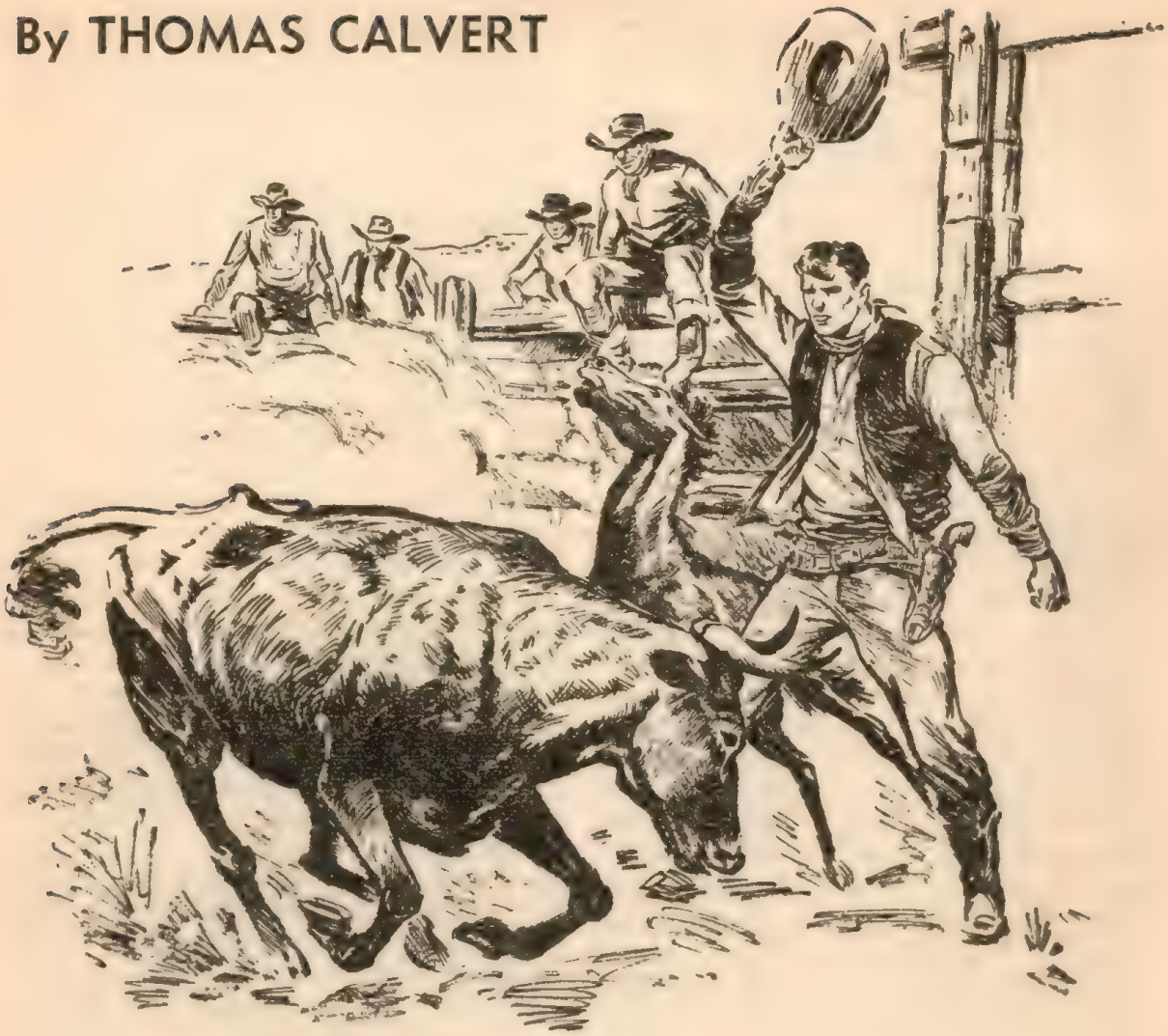
Jody moved to Austin's side and slid her hand into his. She was crying quietly as she looked at him, but through her grief Austin could see the bright edge of a deeper emotion.

"I knew, darling," she whispered. "Honest, I knew all the time!"

Charlie Gaines coughed. Something was in his throat. When he spoke his voice was strangely husky. "Seems fitting we name this point here and now," he said, "in honor of Blue Daineridge."

Austin nodded. He squeezed Jody's hand. "We'll name it in honor of what he's taught us here," he said softly. "We'll call it Point Humility." ● ● ●

By THOMAS CALVERT



The kid yelled and waved his hat

The UTE Kid

THE Ute Kid hit town at roundup. He was about the most harum-scarum, wildest talking, wildest thinking mustang country highpocket, the town of Farrell had seen yet.

There wasn't anything this kid hadn't done; there wasn't any place he hadn't been—according to him.

But none of it was told fresh enough to get him in trouble. He was all good nature and was ready to lend a hand at any chore. The boys just figured he'd never had a chance to talk out at the fires of the wild horse hunters, and this was just about 17 years talk that had piled up in him.

Every Time He Opened His Mouth He Got His Spurs Caught in It!

There was one thing he did know for a fact, and that was handling wild horseflesh. Rope, halter, bridle, or just bare handed and by voice, he was the damnedest natural wrangler the boys had ever seen.

Of course, he was a rodeo expert, too; he admitted four championships. But the wrangling part they really handed him after trying every trick known on the rough string.

He'd only come in on the delivery of the mustangs, but he stayed on and worked through roundup with them. He didn't care about the $20 pay although he didn't have a bean to his name. What he was sticking around for was the rodeo, figuring to pick off eight or ten prizes, including Grand Champion.

The first incident of rodeo day was when a wobbly little colt got into the corral while a particularly ugly cow was roaming around with blood in her eye. The cow took after the colt that apparently, by instinct, ran for the Kid.

The Kid was sitting atop the corral telling about the way he had escaped massacre with Custer, but one yip out of the colt was enough to make him forget. He came down off his perch as if that colt were his own baby, and he began to yell and wave his hat.

THE Kid was just about as gawky as the colt and it created quite a picture. In fact, the ring riders got to laughing so hard, they almost forgot to save the Kid who finally had to lam out on his own, hollering bloody murder.

He got a terrific ovation and accepted it with the unblushing modesty of a brave man. He was so busy grinning at the crowd in general, he missed seeing the excitement in the eyes of Miss Molly Farrell. It was not until the dance that night that he knew of her existence. This was a shattering experience for him, for out of generosity, as he explained, he had let lesser but needier men take all the contests that day.

It didn't matter to her, she said. Matter of fact, she was rather glad. He might have proved a little arrogant and cocky if he'd won all those prizes. This way he was just an ordinary cowboy, and a little pert and pretty freckled girl whose pa only owned 50,000 acres had a chance.

She didn't like celebrities, she said. His heart sank because his stories had a three week start on her by this time, and he couldn't even remember all of them to take back.

He had meant to take a wrangling job with Farrell, but Molly's existence put the kibosh on that. Clear as day, if he meant to moon howl for an owner's daughter, he had to be an owner himself.

The Kid explained to Molly that he had worked the roundup just to get the feel of things. Now he was going to look around and pick himself out a neat little horse ranch. Once he got out that mouthful, he was on pretty safe ground because one thing he did know was horseflesh. He even caught old man Farrell's serious attention two or three times at supper, when he spouted some of his ideas about crossing mustang and quarter-bred.

He faced a rather embarrassing problem now. He was down to his horse and outfit, low on powder, and he didn't have a cent. He was going to have to take a little ride to outside country and go to work to make some, but of course he wouldn't admit that.

He was sitting up on the Farrell stoop with Molly toward sundown. He'd stopped there to explain he had to make a business trip. From there, at this hour of the evening, they could look down over the full reach of the tilting shelf, and watch the massive, tumbled, upthrust of the malpais shaking its shoulder free of the throbbing yellow heat.

The girl said with a shiver, "Even from here, it looks like a big monster waiting to gobble anybody who comes near it."

"Why, that don't look like such bad country to me," the Ute Kid replied. "I don't figure there's much there that would stop a real man."

"Oh, you don't?" the girl mocked him. "Well they just happen to call that malpais, The Killer! There's never been but

one man stumbled in there and got out alive, and he was crazy ever after."

"Shucks, I've crossed half a dozen deserts and badlands like that. I might just take a try at that one for the fun of it some day," the Kid answered with bravado.

Her eyes grew big and serious. "Now don't you ever dare do it! There are places in there where the crust gives way and drops you 500 feet!"

"'Course," he nodded, "if a man's fool enough to step on those places!"

Old man Farrell came onto the stoop and paused to cool himself and view the sunset. "Pa!" she called to him. "This wild man aims to try and explore the malpais!"

The old man chuckled. "Well, the Kid here has a special brand of luck, Molly. I'm sure he'll come back to tell us all about it."

"Why for certain," the Kid nodded. "I'd figure to bring a map back for anybody else what wants to go in there."

Molly beamed and a gentle shine came into her eyes. She recollected that little colt at the rodeo, and the way the Kid had tossed all those contests so that others would have a chance. She murmured a little liquidly, "Always thinking of other folks, aren't you, Kid?"

Her father must have swallowed his quid. Anyway, he choked and had to retire inside coughing.

MOLLY asked the Kid to stay for supper and while she was making the arrangements, the old man came out again and talked around the idea of the Kid coming on the place as wrangler, or even as special trainer.

The Kid sat there taking this offer in. He wanted that job. It would mean something to work for Farrell. But there was his pride, and the girl, and all the things he'd told her about being an owner. You couldn't work for a man and court his daughter.

So he cleared the squeak out of his voice and allowed his thanks, but he'd made arrangements to look at a couple of little old places that might do for a start—just 5 or 10,000 acres.

Farrell was the kind of a man who let things take their course, though. Maybe in a way he felt sorry for a kid who bluffed himself out of opportunity. But cow country was no school for coddling. He did find excuse to give the kid a couple of plugs of his favorite tobacco as a riding present. After all, he could remember the kid saving that colt at the rodeo too, and that stacked up against a heap of fault.

The Kid checked out after supper, feeling awfully heavy under the breastbone. Doggone, he'd really have to sweat this out now. He'd have to be taller than his stories somehow, or else not come back at all.

Right now, he felt the urge to just go away and hide and never come back to any part of this country. But he was going to come back and justify himself to Molly.

He looked down country and his spirits soared. Shucks, what was he thinking about? All he had to do to make everything fine and dandy was explore that little old malpais! Why that would be apple pie. He was as good as a hero already.

He rode along humming then. He rode over to another county where the roundup was late and got himself a good job, and set out grimly after prizes in the rodeo. He didn't get any champion's prize, but he did all right. He made money. And out of it he got an extra job breaking some wild mustangs, and he had plenty ammunition to get him vittles, and $60 jingling in his pocket when he rode back to Farrell.

He rode back by way of the malpais country, and he had to admit that The Killer was a little more formidable looking close up than it had been. Its barriers of sandstone and lava and ash hills looked treacherous. A man could get lost right inside the first walls without ever getting further. Inside of that, he guessed there were craters and maybe hot springs and geysers, or maybe it was bone dead, dry and sterile. A wind gouged and twisted and tumbled mesa rose like thunder and

extended 15 miles.

Yessir, he thought, that ain't going to be no picnic! But he jingled his $60 and that made him feel better, and he settled the whole matter by just deciding to put it off awhile.

He rode back to Farrell and when Molly asked him out for Sunday he took along a horsehair bridle he had made for her. It impressed the old man, except that he didn't believe the Kid had made it. But it gave the Kid a chance to sound off about the other things he was making in preparation for the spread he meant to get.

He had decided to put it that way. He'd even decided that he'd buck the hard-boiled truth and tell the old man he meant to homestead. Only somehow his tongue got kind of twisted, and first thing he knew he was claiming he'd already bought himself a little ranch, and was just waiting for the old owners to sell off their stock, on account of not wanting to be hard on them.

The girl liked that angle when he told it, but he had an acutely uncomfortable idea that the old man didn't. In fact, he got the shocking notion that maybe the old man didn't believe him.

THINGS jerked along like that. He made a few rawhide lariats and sold them in another town, and once he went back to his home wilds on a trip and picked himself up three tolerable mustangs. But it was pretty clear that nothing good was going to happen. There was no decent homestead land left in this county or the next one, and he didn't have the money to buy an acre.

He worked the fall shakedown, and he won some local rodeo prizes this time, but that still wasn't enough to satisfy the old man. He'd given the Kid rope to see if he could square up to his lies, but actually, he wasn't much better off than he had been, and he was in a spot now where he just couldn't take a local job with anyone.

Furthermore, the Kid made the mistake of blurting out a story about going into the malpais. Not a real trip—he had sense enough for that—but he cooked up a lulu about pushing in five miles and getting half way up the mesa. That story just about finished him with the old man. Especially, when he produced a map.

Worse, the girl didn't believe him this time.

He figured he was making just about his last visits to the ranch when word came while he was out there that the Red Roamer was back in the country.

Now the Red Roamer was a true and living fable of horseflesh known for 500 miles—a stallion who roamed the Rockies like a lord, sneaking his cavvy through the more elaborate traps, and making damned fools out of the whole cow country stealing mares.

The whole county turned out. Horsemen began coming into Farrell's like it was Injun alarm or roundup. They meant to currycomb every box and canyon in that region, and put on a drive a jackrabbit couldn't get through.

In this horse talk, the Kid's advice might have been asked, except now he'd blown so much big wind and proved so shiftless, nobody trusted him in any way at all. In fact, old man Farrell was not so excited but that he saw a good opportunity to rid the range and his daughter's mind entirely of him.

He said at the general meeting, appointing various duties and rendezvous and posts, "Being as the Kid here knows something of the malpais, we'll send him down as guard on that end."

The crowd grinned, for the malpais was entirely surrounded by desert, bone dry and formidable in itself. Not even a burro in its right mind would drift onto that sterile sea of sand and hardpan, let alone into the malpais. But the Kid had to take it or blurt out the truth, and he just wasn't up to that confession. So he swallowed hard and set his jaws, knowing this was the start of his drift, the bitter end of all his big dreams and hopes of finally winning Molly.

She felt it, of course. She was out by his pony when he sneaked out ahead of the other men. She'd brought him an

extra canteen as a gift, a big one.

She traced her fingers over the edge lines of his saddle, and murmured, "I'll keep an eye on your wickiup and stuff all the time you're gone, Kid."

He said somberly, "I'll turn those extra ponies onto your grass to range, I guess. You can have 'em if I don't come back, Molly."

She broke then, flinging her arms around his neck and covering his cheek with tears and kisses. "Why did you have to keep building new stories? Can't you figure some way to get out of this?"

"Oh, I ain't licked," he gulped. "I'll make 'em 'shamed they didn't believe me! I think I'll go down there and map that whole malpais just to shame 'em."

She put her head against his chest with a new cry, then. He hadn't even known that he was talking. That boast had just busted out of him.

THE plan for the drive was pretty well laid out. They'd build a mile long horse trap in the center of the county's graze. Every man was equipped with two smoke bombs, to be used only if they saw the Red Roamer himself, and by these, most of the riders could keep track of his line of flight even at a distance.

Any man managing to drop his loop upon the stallion would own him, and the share of reward money on branded mares he'd stolen. The remainder of ponies would be portioned out to the range in common.

Of all the riders in that drive, the Kid alone would have to fend for himself, for he'd be 15 miles beyond any place a horse might ever hide or graze.

He drew his smoke bombs and supplies. Farrell himself was checking the stuff out, and he paused to scrutinize the Kid. Gruffly but not unkindly, he advised, "Don't take things too hard, boy. You were young and wild and came in mighty hot. Next time just pace yourself and hit a true stride, and you're like to come in on top."

"Sure," the Kid gulped and forced a trembling grin. "You been real swell to me, Mr. Farrell." He turned away, but then he swung back at the door. "But shucks, I'm going to drop my loop on that stallion to sire my breed. This range ain't shed of me yet!"

He lurched out then before he busted out bawling. Farrell looked at the empty door a minute, then looked at T. S. Coleman with a tightness in his grin.

"What can you do?" Coleman asked. "We all have to learn the hard way."

The Kid rode down the great upswell of the land alone, jaws locked to keep the sobs from breaking. He located a handy spring at the desert edge, and he made dry camp about a mile out from the malpais. He hunkered down feeling lower than a snake, watching The Killer against the sundown and thinking of all the useless lies and boasts he'd made.

As he looked out he saw the speck of an eagle cruising the flame and golden sky and excitement began to stir through him. He'd bet ten to one that old Mr. Eagle had spotted Red Roamer's cavvy. An eagle didn't bother to watch mounted horses.

It wasn't going to do him any good. That eagle was watching an area miles away. But out of instinct, his mind began to figure just what that old smart stallion would do when he figured he was being chased.

Probably he'd head for the highest country that he knew. He'd sneak right back through that drag line at night, and light out for country south or north and never stop until he got there. The Kid didn't think the stallion would ever hit the wings of that trap at all. Not Red Roamer! He'd smell man, and he had smelled man and followed fence and pole lines to trap gates too often.

He got so stirred up figuring all this that he forgot his heartaches. He was the hunter now, keen and wise with experience. They could say what they liked. He knew horseflesh at least.

He made himself a little fire for supper —brush and greasewood and a dead yucca. He hunkered there with his fire dying and darkness gathering around him, still keen with hunting instincts, soaking in

the feels and smells of the night, and listening to the small desert creatures.

At dawn old Mr. Eagle was right up there where he had been last night, glinting in the first ray of sunlight, long before the mists and shadows had cleared off the ground. Day's heat washed over the desert and haze began to build through the heating malpais, and the Kid got asaddle and rode to higher ground. Riding back to the desert with the lift of heat, he looked for the eagle in the molten sky and he was right up there where he'd been that morning—a little nearer, a little down country.

A terrific excitement pounded through the Kid. *Down country!* But no, that was too much to hope for. No smart stallion was going to lead his cavvy onto desert bottoms. Still, there was high country to the side; he might be heading over this chain of hills into the next county. He went without a supper fire anyway, on chance.

Near midnight, he guessed, the coyotes became wildly excited upgrade. They stopped talking after a time and he fell into a heavy doze, but through his sleep, he was vaguely aware of a faint pulsing sound upon the air near dawn.

HE LOOKED for the eagle and found it nearer, but flying in a great circle that gave no particular information this morning. It was keeping the cavvy in sight, but it was getting hungry and ranging now with more immediate thoughts of smaller game to fill its stomach.

Unloosing his rope, the Kid limbered it carefully, and gave his loop a few practice tries. Then he rode back up onto the high ground of yesterday, riding the ridges and watching the valley and the passes eastward. He made his supper fire and ate in a gully before he dropped back to the desert that evening.

When he reached the desert he reined up and hunkered and dozed that way. His eyes popped open with first light, and he was instantly wide awake. Old Mr. Eagle was up there, right smack over the malpais. He had a hard time holding in his impatience until daylight.

As he rode to the edge of the malpais, his pony showed interest in a direction of smell. He sat there trying to hold his breathing down, for there was horse sign that twisted in through buttes and boulders and beyond.

In the wind-scoured face of the first rolling ramparts, was a twisting fissure so oblique and narrow that a man might pass it and never see it.

He checked his water and decided to take a chance and put his pony into the fissure. The crack was wide enough, but it grew low, and shortly he had to get afoot and lead the pony through shadow with air so dead, it scarcely supplied anything to breathe.

Coming out in a tumbled sea of hard sandstone mounds, he saw they were too steep to climb, and each looked exactly like another. By direct sunlight, this dead, silent sea would be a firepit.

There was a little trail, not much. Then there was none. He was afraid to ramble in these mounds. When the sun came overhead, he'd have no direction in here. And when it passed, it would be out of sight beyond the rims of the towering peaks above.

He was already soaked with sweat and was breathing heavily. Fresh heat was washing over the rims above and dropping. He had hit the worst treachery of the badlands, the heat traps, the sameness, the maize of dead and silent monotony where a man could lose direction in 20 steps and go crazy in that many minutes from glare and heat and suffocation.

The Kid looked again for sign and could not find it on this hard-scoured footing, and every instinct in him cried a warning to be gone. But here was the chance he had boasted to Molly and Farrell, and he could remember the girl's passionate, torn kisses and her tears against his face.

He wound his reins around his saddle horn and slapped the pony on ahead of him. If it followed trail and the trail lifted out of these dead heat traps soon enough, all right. If the pony failed him—well—

Day's intense heat beat down on him,

fogging his senses. Glare slashed with physical impact off the rocks. He grabbed his pony's tail and lurched drunkenly behind it. Outcroppings of rock hit his face and shoulder and knees, and once he lurched and hung over a sea of writhing heat and was saved only by the upward pull of his pony.

The grades grew too stiff for even the saddled pony. He had to fix a skeleton rig, and leave his saddle and bridle on an outcrop. They stopped oftener and oftener, with the rocks a hot griddle right against them, and hell's heat on their other side, and a molten sky over them.

SUNDOWN flamed across his baked, dazed senses. It put an ache straight through his bursting lungs. And then with dusk, there came sudden cool and air and the smell of grasses, and the grade was over. He looked out through red-rimmed, glare-filled eyes at a tumbled mass of low peaks and valleys, and heard a startled stallion's bugle from the crest of a ridge.

He looked at the horizon and there was still light. Dusk was but a shadow rising from the grounds. He had to fight to stand erect, he had to force himself to do what had to be done.

First a rope around his mare's neck before that primitive, godlike stallion called her, then a match to the smoke bomb.

He tied his pony to a rock. Then with an effort such as he had never known, he climbed atop the rock, away from the hoofs of that stallion should he come.

The stallion came. The Kid knew it vaguely through a fatigued, slumber. Red Roamer tried to take the mare but was shy of the man smell upon the rock. When the Kid wakened in bright daylight, the great red beast was still in sight, looking back at the mare and pawing and calling. But it had its cavvy, and there was the enemy, man, and shortly it took the cavvy on to further shallow valleys.

The Kid stood on the rock and looked out at this *llano* kingdom. A line of trees bordering a creek was in clear sight. He rode his pony over for drink, his whole body beaten. He stripped and he was black and blue and cut all over.

He found brush and had the food he badly needed. Riding to a bare, far rim, he set off his second smoke bomb. He went down trail then, just as he'd come up, but he rolled stones from that shelf where he'd left his saddle to block the trail and seal the stallion up.

Then he dropped back into that pit of burned-out air, praying his pony would be as good at following the trail out.

He came out through the fissure behind that rock nest at sundown. Somewhere nearby, the heavy bark of three shots rolled across the desert. He put two shots back into the air, and then three more.

When he heard the drum of hoofbeats and men calling, he answered hoarsely, and then Farrell caught him around a shoulder and was putting whisky to his mouth and asking, "You all right, son?"

"Sure," he gasped. "It wasn't nothing."

Somebody laughed. "It wasn't nothing! He ain't got more than tatters on!"

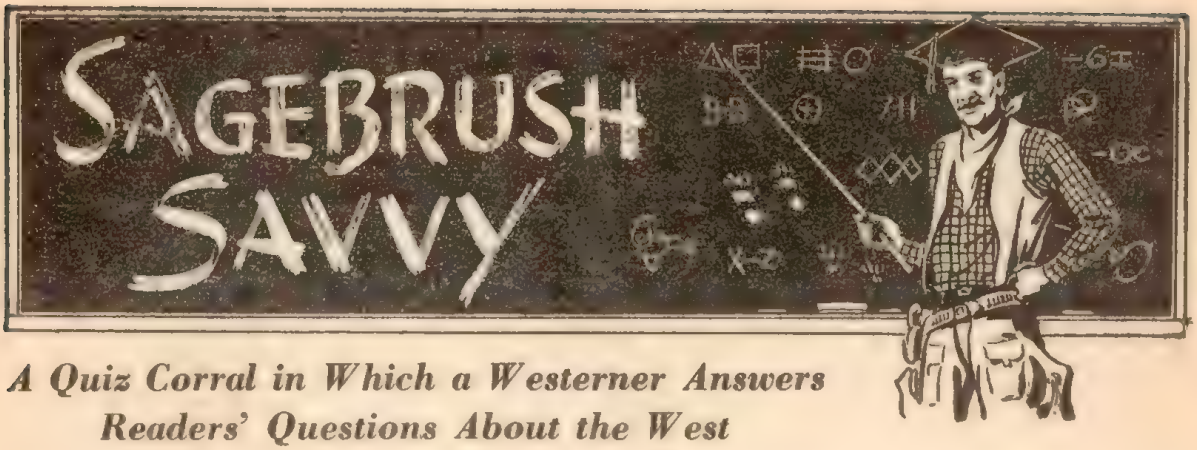
"Why, I good as mapped that whole malpais top while I was up there," the Kid managed. "That's just where I been figuring for my ranch all along!"

He didn't mean it. It just popped out.

Farrell was silent a second and then he chuckled. He filled the desert dusk with his booming laughter. "Well, I guess it is all right, Kid, when you can back it! And I guess a man who owns the Red Roamer, and good as owns a malpais of his own can manage. You get close to that wild red devil, Ute Kid?"

"Shucks," the Ute Kid told him, feeling the burst of strength from the liquor, "I had him roped! What did you think took me so long?"

Farrell glanced at the darkening shadow of the Kid's pony. The rope was still around the pony's neck, tied in a picket knot and hanging. Just where that rope had been all along. He shook his head, but he was grinning. Damned if the Kid wouldn't turn out a millionaire yet—give him the chance to tell a whopper big enough so it took a million dollars to outshadow it. Well, that's what Molly had claimed all along.



A Quiz Corral in Which a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—(1) Would the first Colt cap and ball pistols shoot the metallic cartridges? (2) Did the Lone Ranger and the Rio Kid really live in the Old West?—Alva R. (Va.).

A.—(1) The first Colt cap and ball pistols would not shoot metal case cartridges unless made over by a competent gunsmith. (2) The Lone Ranger and the Rio Kid are fictional characters based on types of men who did actually live in the west, but are not actual historical characters. Some Texas Rangers, including Capt. John R. Hughes and Capt. Bill McDonald, were sometimes called "lone rangers" because they did a lot of law work singlehanded, but neither ever wore the monicker exclusively. Several Border outlaws, including one named John Andrews, liked to call themselves "The Rio Grande Kid," but none was ever big-shot enough to be so remembered in history. If any T.R. reader knows of actual characters so called, I'll be glad to stand corrected.

Q.—Are there any fish in the Great Salt Lake of Utah?—F.D. (Fla.)

A.—No. Only marine life in its very salty water is a very small, inedible variety of shrimp.

Q.—Were burros ever used as harness animals in the Old West?—B.B.C. (W.Va.)

A.—A lot of heavy freighting in the Pecos River country of Texas and New Mexico was done with burro teams, with up to 16 jassacks per team. Natives of New Mexico have always used burros to some extent as harness animals, and you will still see a team of these long-eared donkeys hitched to a wagon now and then in the New Mexico hills.

Q.—Where can I order a pair of real made-to-measure cowboy boots?—Jess (Ala.)

A.—I can't answer that without busting the rule against free advertising, but there are dozens of good bootmakers in the west, and if you want to write me personally in care of T.R., I'll be glad to tell you where I get mine.

Q.—Can you tell me who wrote the song "When It's Springtime In the Rockies"?—Mabel (Ohio.)

A.—Yep, a very nice lady, now a grandmother, named Mrs. Mary Hale Woolsey, of Salt Lake City, Utah.

Q.—Does any other state besides Texas have Rangers?—B.H. (Pa.)

A.—At present I think not, but during its territorial days Arizona's mounted police were called Arizona Rangers.

Q.—Which is the right spelling "Chisholm" Trail or "Chisum" Trail?—L.W.N. (Ariz.)

A.—Longhorn cattle were first driven over the original Chisholm Trail from deep in the heart of Texas to Abilene, Kansas about 1867. That one was named for Jess Chisholm. Later, John Chisum, know as Cattle King of the Pecos, drove herds from the Conchos River in Texas to the Pecos River in New Mexico. Although better known as the Goodnight Trail, this route is sometimes called the Chisum Trail. Two trails, two spellings, both correct.

—S. Omar Barker

The strange true tale of a millionaire who never saw his son, but who left all his dreams for him in . . .

THE CUP

by WILLIAM CARTER

IN A showcase at the University of California there rests a neatly-fashioned silver cup which tells one of the most poignant of all American sagas.

It is rather odd that it should be of silver since the story's background is that of the gold rush, but the story is mostly that of a man.

Jim Birch was one of the most remarkable individuals of that dynamic turbulent period of almost a century ago. As a boy he was only a common stagecoach hand, but at 29 he was a multi-millionaire and was called "the most important man in the conquest of space by horseflesh."

An Easterner, Birch had been driving a stagecoach in New England, out of Providence, R. I., when he fell in love with his boss's beautiful daughter, Julia Chase. How could a mere stagecoach hand aspire to one so gracious and highborn as the daughter of the head of a stagecoach line? Jim Birch decided there was only one thing to do—go to California, win a fortune in the gold rush and then come back and claim the lovely Julia.

One day, sinking most of his modest savings in a wagon and a team of oxen, he set out for the promised land of California. It took him four months to get

there. He wasn't there many hours, though, when it came to him that this land which was rapidly opening up offered a challenge in something besides finding the yellow lucre—transportation.

There were a lot of folks in those parts anxious to get from one unlikely place to what they hoped would be a more rewarding one, and they were generally in a hurry. Jim Birch exchanged his wagon and oxen for a coach and a couple of horses, and he went into a stagecoach business. He worked out of Sacramento, charging a dollar a mile for trips.

As it turned out, Birch wasn't the only one to have this idea. In fact, competition was pretty stiff. But the young man from Providence persevered and soon forged ahead of his competitors, continually improving his coaches in speed and comfort. It wasn't too long before he was making $1000 a day profit—and more.

A TIME came when Jim Birch felt he should go back and claim the beautiful Julia—which he did. But on his return East, he got a new, and as he thought, better idea.

The great challenge in transportation was not the several hundred miles between the gold fields and towns of California, but that of getting people from the eastern section of the nation to the western, and, conversely, back again too. More and more people, he knew, would be coming from the East to fabulous California, some to stay, some on temporary business—but they'd all want to get back and forth as comfortably and quickly as possible.

There were stagecoaches running between some of the larger towns along the way, but there was no transcontinental stagecoach set-up. And that, young Jim Birch decided, was what was needed.

Jim Birch married Julia Chase and he stayed around Providence for a while. But the dream that he had dreamed returning home—a great cross-continent stagecoach line—was too much to resist.

Jim went back to make it a reality.

He did too, though it took quite a bit of doing. It meant consolidating certain lines already in existence, linking up new towns. A lot of people thought he was crazy with that impossible transcontinental idea of his; they were more convinced than ever when they learned the young man—he was only 24—had sunk close to a million dollars into the venture. But in less than five years the California Stage Co., one of the greatest stagecoach lines ever established, was worth twenty-five times that much.

Whenever he could, Jim returned East to be with his wife. He hesitated about bringing her West to what was still primitive country. Someday he figured, he'd go back to Providence to stay with his lovely young wife and never leave her again.

Jim Birch was in California when he got the wonderful news that he was soon to be a father. And the story might have had a matter-of-fact and pleasant enough ending if young Birch had decided to go back East via the famed stagecoach line he himself had created. But he was so anxious to return to Providence that he elected to go by boat over the Panama route. He figured he could get home even quicker that way.

Before he left, an old stagecoach hand of his gave him a cup, a silver cup. "For your young 'un," he grinned broadly.

Jim Birch accepted the present with prideful thanks. During the voyage, a matter which sometimes brought raised eyebrows from other passengers, he'd sit for hours on the deck and, holding the cup in his hand, smile to himself.

He was clutching the silver cup when the ship, the side-wheeler *Central America*, went down in a storm with 400 persons and probably an overloaded amount of gold bullion.

FOR awhile the brilliant young stagecoach executive clung to a floating wreckage with 20 other men. In all the violent swirl of water, he managed somehow to hold onto that silver cup which he was taking to his unborn child. Finally, though, he felt he could not last it out any

longer. His strength ebbed away. He gave the silver cup to a mulatto near him, a fellow named John Andrews.

Birch told Andrews his name, and that he was from Providence, and he said to him, "If you survive, please give this cup to my wife. If you find yourself going, give it to someone else with the same message."

One by one the men holding on the flotsam found their strength leaving them and they'd let go and disappear. When, at dawn, a lifeboat came along there was only one man still clinging to the wreckage.

The last survivor was also a mulatto, George Dawson. When he scrambled into the lifeboat, the silver cup was still in his possession.

The silver cup, coming so unexpectedly out of the maw of the turbulent sea, was to take on the glowing emblem of a miracle before the trip was over. It was to be the salvation of them all. When water filled the lifeboat, it was the silver cup that enabled them to bail it out. And it was with the cup that they caught the rainwater without which they would have been unable to quench their mounting thirst.

So it was that the lifeboat band, including George Dawson, did survive and the cup came into the possession of the beautiful but heartbroken Julia Chase Birch in Providence. In time it was turned over to the University of California, still somehow a strangely haunting vessel that mirrored in its shimmering metal the hopes, the ambitions, the greed and, yes, the sentimentality of a bygone day.

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He reined savagely, sending the horse toward the alley

Whelped by a Wolf

By AL STORM

It was plain his father meant to let him hang for a crime the old man himself had committed

ONCE, years ago in a saloon brawl in El Paso, Bruce Koleen had been kicked in the groin. It was a thing he would never forget, the numbing sickishness washing through him, the draining of all strength. Now, but for the absence of actual physical pain, the same sensation was pulling at him.

He pawed through the manger of bluestem hay, wonderment and disbelief growing. And yet he knew that he had not been mistaken. It was there, damningly—a striped canvas mail pouch and three small canvas bags bearing the indelible stamp of CHARLES BUTTERWORTH EXPRESS COMPANY.

For the space of ten heart beats

Koleen stared blindly at the canvas bags. Savage laughter pulled at him.

Damn it, why act so surprised? he mocked himself. You've been hearing for a year how neither God nor man was going to make Old Tom leave this piece of dried-out Texas back country. You know he's had his back to the wall for so long his hindside drips blood. Now he's jumped the line and you act like it was something that couldn't happen! Slowly Bruce Koleen pulled whisps of hay back over the makeshift cache.

Outside the moon was bright as a new Mex peso perched on the chaparral scrub that rimmed the far ridge. Light pouring in through the open barn door flooded the hay-filled manger. A jaded bay horse that showed black with uncurried sweat tugged at the hay, and Bruce Koleen slapped it away with the flat of his hand. A strange horse, he noted absently, but the strangeness meant nothing in this land where a horse could be borrowed for the asking. Old Tom could have picked it up anyplace.

It had to be Old Tom. No one else would rob a stage coach and so casually dump the loot in another man's manger. Tom—Old Tom Koleen—strait-laced, lumpy jawed Old Tom Koleen.

Koleen canted his head in listening. But there was no sound to the Texas night, neither yip-yap-yapping of coyotes nor bullbats' savage little screeching. A glance up the slope showed yellow lamplight spilling from the uncurtained kitchen windows of the ranch house.

Probably heard me coming and had to hide the mail pouch and money bags in a hurry, an unbidden thought came into his mind.

IT WASN'T a nice thing to think of one's father; but nice things hadn't been thought between them for months now. Koleen shook his head, more puzzled than hurt.

Each saddle-weary bone and aching muscle of his body testified to the struggle it was taking to keep the Koleen Lazy K ranch afloat. Only, Bruce knew, they weren't making it. Drought, tumbling cattle prices and an inexplicable shortage in the calf crop had licked them months ago. He'd known it then and been ready to pull freight for Wyoming, Bruce and his sidekick, Red Neilson. But tough old Tom Koleen had roared him down.

"Pull out just 'cause the going gets tough?" he'd yelled. "Why, you coyote-yellow son! Your Ma is buried up there on that knoll. Your two brothers lie aside her keeping company until it's my time to join them. You think I'm leaving them there alone? Run—if you ain't got the guts to hack 'er here! But you're running alone!"

Even thinking back over the scene pulled heat into Bruce Koleen's veins. Damn him, he thought angrily. A drowning man don't kick back away from shore just so's he can keep fighting the water. He remembered half-guiltily that he'd shouted something about robbing banks or sticking up stage coaches then, that the Lazy K wouldn't feed a half-starved gopher. Oh, it had been a sweet fracas, stopped on the bare rim of physical violence only because neither man would give way enough to swing the first blow.

But, if each of them was too stubborn to be first to swing a fist, so each was too stubborn to make apology. The trouble lay between them, a festering living thing needing but a snort of disdain or a sly double-meaning phrase to bring it smoking to the surface of a man's eyes.

"A stage robber!" Koleen murmured to himself. "Honorable, hard fighting Old Tom Koleen!"

He knew that there had been a recent flurry of holdups and gambling house robberies. Sheriff Ben Harvey had been running in circles for weeks now. But to tie the thing . . . Koleen shook his head, a strange tint of respect adding color to his concept of the old man.

The sweated bay horse began worrying the hay again, uncovering a section of striped canvas. Without thinking, Koleen lifted the mail pouch and money bags out of the manger.

A hell of a place to hide anything, he thought. That damned horse would have it uncovered . . . .

He froze, listening carefully to the low pulsing undertone that had moved into the night. Horses, a lot of them, and coming fast from somewhere north and east, probably following that old Comanche Trail from Broken Head Peak.

Suddenly remembering the sacks in his hands, Koleen crossed to the oat bin and climbed inside. There, in utter darkness, he gouged a hole in the oat pile and buried the Butterworth sacks. Then he climbed back outside and latched the bin door, stamping his boots hard to dislodge any loose beards that might have clung to his clothing. A shadow lay across the barn aisle, moved, and he looked up swiftly, impulsively taking a half-step back toward deeper darkness.

Old Tom Koleen stood in the doorway. "What'd you hide, Bruce?"

"All my gold," Bruce mocked. "I hear there's thieves in the neighborhood."

He saw anger tighten his father's eyes and somehow the anger brought a brittle mirthless laugh to Bruce's mouth. Antagonism sparkled between them. And, outside, the pulsing undertone became the clearly discernible clatter of hoofs.

"Bruce! I try to remember your mother, what she would have wanted. All the dreams we had. . . ."

HE WAS a high shouldered giant of a man, this Old Tom Koleen who stood blocking the barn doorway; heavier than his son, with the hard sediments of maturity thickening his body. But otherwise they were of a like mold, tall standing, sparse fleshed, honed by fatigue and uncertainty and the will to fight.

The running drum of horse noise died abruptly outside. Saddle leather creaked.

"We'll talk about this later, Bruce," Old Tom said, turning away.

Bruce watched as the old man blocked out the moonlight of the doorway and then disappeared, walking to meet the riders. Bruce moved to the door and stood watching. Old Tom's head was up, his shoulders erect.

Playing the role of innocence for all it is worth. Thinking of Mom—ha! What is she thinking now? The old man a bandit! Bruce spat derisively. Or was the old man right? Was his loyalty a greater thing than the law of society, his fighting to hold this arid land which contained her dust until his own time came to join her beyond man-made claim to money, or gold, or Butterworth Express sacks?

Bruce squinted through the hazy half-light, trying to picture his father more clearly. A fighter, one not stopping just because the law said he was whipped and that only by going outlaw could he find resources which would enable him to keep on fighting. It was even possible, Bruce reflected momentarily, that the old man didn't know about the sacks. But he discarded the thought almost as soon as he received it. No stranger was going around dropping valuables in a man's manger. No!—it was Old Tom, right enough.

He heard Old Tom call out, "Why, howdy, Sheriff. What brings you to these parts this time of night?"

Sheriff Ben Harvey did not answer immediately and, from his position just inside the barn, Bruce could see the stiffness that began creeping across Old Tom.

Involuntarily the old man twisted to peer toward the barn.

Toward the hiding place of the mail pouch!

"The Norton-Pecos stage got hit again, Tom," Ben Harvey explained slowly. "We was kinda watching for it and got us a good fresh track to follow."

The sheriff's reticence was its own mute accusation, and Bruce saw his

father take a stiff backward stride.

"Why, now, Ben—" Old Tom's voice trailed off. He stood with his boots wide planted, shoulders hunching forward to meet the impact of what Ben Harvey would next say.

He's caught and he knows it, Bruce thought soberly. Now he'll have to surrender or fight.

And strangely, Old Tom's characteristic phrase began hammering his brain: Neither God nor man is going to make me leave the Lazy K! Neither God nor man—

He was alone, hemmed in by the fanned out posse members, Bruce saw. Alone, vulnerable, a plain and open target standing there in the blaze of moonlight. Yet he didn't know the meaning of the word "surrender."

"Damn you, for a fool," Bruce snarled softly. "Why couldn't you at least be sneaky in this?"

"We had us a trap laid," Ben Harvey was saying. His voice was low, conversational, but utterly devoid of warmth. "But we fell too far behind. The stage was stopped before we could catch up again. So we had to follow the tracks—and they brung us to the Lazy K, Tom."

THERE it was, in the open, the challenge for Old Tom to face. Bruce saw him back another step, saw him stop and shake his head.

"Mightn't there be a mistake, Ben?"

"There was!" the lawman said flatly. "But we never made it. The trail was plain all the way."

Bruce Koleen stepped clear of the barn, moving fast across the bright swath of moonlight in an endeavor to forestall what next his father might do. One of the posse members saw him. A quick flurry of movement rippled the line of horsemen.

"It's all right, Ben," he called hurriedly when he saw the glint of moonlight along a drawn gun. "You trailed me to my den. I'll come quietly."

Old Tom Koleen jerked as though he'd been slapped.

Bruce laughed harshly. "You been harping to me about loyalty to the Lazy K," he said. "And about Mom up there on the knoll. I think she's liking what I'm doing better than—"

Sheriff Ben Harvey gigged his horse forward, cutting between Old Tom and Bruce.

"Take his gun, Ike. You, Old Tom, stand pat!"

Ike Reynolds stepped out of his saddle and sidled around to approach Bruce from the rear. A quick jerk and the gun was lifted. Reynolds backed away, circling again until he came up beside Ben Harvey's boot. He handed up the gun, and Harvey thrust it under his belt.

"Now get his horse, Ike," Harvey directed.

Reynolds left, walking toward the barn. Ben Harvey twisted to look down upon old Tom. "You want to come to town with us, Tom?"

Bruce tried to catch his father's eye. But Old Tom Koleen was still playing his role, slumping his shoulders as though burdened by unbearable grief. Sight of the man's feigned anguish angered Bruce and he looked away.

Deceit was a weakness he had never suspected in the old man. But, for that matter, neither had he suspected him of robbery. Somehow the staunch, stiff-backed idol was melting away, showing a rottenness, a hollowing weakness that shamed the name of Koleen.

This I will do for you—for Mom's sake, he thought. But when it's over I'm pulling out. You can stick here and brood and figure and scheme in your warped crazy way. And the next skunk you'll have to skin yourself.

"Come on, Ben," he said impatiently. "You got me. Let's go."

A day or two in jail, just long enough to give Old Tom time to cover his tracks and figure out an alibi. Then he'd prove to Ben Harvey that he couldn't have robbed the stage. Charlie Norris would testify that he and Bruce Koleen had been grubbing mesquite stumps with

Charlie's work team at the time.

"Comin', Tom?" Sheriff Harvey repeated.

Old Tom Koleen shook his head. "He's admitted his guilt," he said hoarsely. "If there was a question of doubt, I'd fight through hell and high water for him. But he has admitted that he's the one you want."

Bruce Koleen felt his temper flare. He spun on his heel, words raising hot to his lips. But he stopped, locking his jaws.

"He's an old man," he told himself. "He's trapped and scared and he's doing his damndest to cover his tracks while he can. With a little time he'll get set and figure out something."

Ike Reynolds brought a saddled horse and he swung up into the saddle, sitting quietly while his feet were roped to the stirrups, his hands bound to the horn. Once he twisted and saw Old Tom staring at him.

"For Mom and the Lazy K," Bruce taunted.

Old Tom turned away, walking toward the ranch house without speaking. Ben Harvey leaned from the saddle and took up the reins of the prisoner's horse. The posse began moving across the Lazy K ranch yard—and out. Bruce held himself stiffly, but somehow there was no elation within him.

"Old Tom ain't a bad man to have for a father," Ben Harvey said, once they were beyond earshot of the Lazy K. "You might try pulling with him instead of against him, Bruce. He's had a rough time of it what with losing Ellen and them two youngsters and all." Ben Harvey sighed and looked up at the velvet soft sky. "Seems a man never learns that a father's main interest is his son's welfare. Nor do some sons learn—"

"Did Hike ever learn, Ben?"

Ben Harvey made no answer, and Bruce was instantly contrite. He'd ridden with Hike Harvey and Red Neilson through most of their growing-up years, shared with them, fought with them. Red had been older, wilder, but it was Hike who had been shot dead in Bueltown a year ago, mixed up in some kind of woman trouble.

"You can bat me for that remark, Ben," he said. "I'm sorry."

Ben Harvey did not answer, and they rode in silence for upward of an hour.

Then Harvey spat, clearing his throat. "You can save me a lot of trouble if you'll tell me where you hid the stuff, Bruce. I'll have to search until I find it, otherwise."

FOR a moment Bruce was tempted to tell. He didn't want the damned stuff, and it'd be a joke on Old Tom if the law should snatch it out from under his very nose. But Bruce remembered that Old Tom had caught him coming out of the oat bin. When the old man found the manger empty he'd know what had happened. And he'd probably be caught with it should Ben Harvey send any of his posse back looking for it now.

He shook his head. "Reckon I'm getting plumb forgetful, Ben."

Ben Harvey looked at him and sighed but did not press it farther.

A posse-member came up behind, pulling in to ride alongside Ben Harvey.

"You know, Ben," the man said, "I been noticing. This hoss Bruce Koleen is forking ain't the hoss we trailed from the stage. This one leaves a wider print and don't show that cracked shoe on the off front."

Bruce watched the sheriff ponder this bit of information.

The sheriff half-turned, yelling: "Ike Reynolds! Come up here!" And when Ike Reynolds rode up, Ben Harvey said, "Where'd you get that horse for Koleen?"

The posse-man spat and wiped his mouth on his shirt cuff. "Why, hell, Ben. Everybody in the country knows Bruce Koleen's gray. It was still sweated from a long run so I just threw the kak back on and brung her out like you wanted."

"Any other horses sweated in that barn?"

"There was a bay," Reynolds remembered slowly. "Don't know about him being sweated though. Then there was Old Tom's—"

"Take Matt Thompson and head back," Harvey said. "Fetch in the horse we trailed away from the stage road. Matt'll know by the print which one it is. Bring him in whether he's bay, or black, or brindle."

Reynolds reined away, and Koleen twisted to watch after him. This new development he did not like. The whole grandstand play of confessing had been more to goad the old man than to protect him. He'd had it flung into his face too often—the charge of lack of loyalty, lack of appreciation, lack of damned near everything that Old Tom considered a virtue.

"Saddle up and leave if that's what you've a mind to!" Old Tom had raged time and again. "A full belly and a whiskey breath is about all you want out of life anyhow. Light a shuck if the going is too rough for you here. But me—I'm staying as long as I've got breath to fight with. Side me, or coyote, but I'm staying on Lazy K!"

Maybe it was temper drawn ragged by too much work and worry coupled to too little sleep. Or maybe the old man really thought that seeking better conditions was turning tail and running. Bruce couldn't tell. He'd thought it over carefully during the times he cursed himself for a damned fool for ever staying. And as carefully he'd examined his flimsy excuses for staying. To neither could he give a good reason. It just seemed that day followed day and each found him grubbing along under the hot Texas sun.

Thinking back over it made Koleen chuckle. He'd thrown the old man's charges back in his teeth. And, unless Reynolds and Thompson spoiled things by catching Old Tom fooling with those express sacks, Old Tom Koleen would never again call his son disloyal. Unless —that was the sticker. Koleen scowled.

He turned toward the lawman. "I confessed, didn't I? What in hell you want to keep bothering Old Tom with this for? A two-bit stage holdup and you run around like it was something big."

Ben Harvey's jaw squared. "I want the horse that made that trail to the Lazy K. And this ain't just a two-bit holdup, Mister. That gutshot killed a man!"

Shock whipped Koleen back in his saddle. His face altered. He could feel it, but he couldn't control it.

"Who—who got it, Ben?"

Ben Harvey did not answer. And Koleen saw then that the lawman was thin lipped with anger.

"Talk, Ben, damn it!" Koleen said. "If—"

"Shut up or I'll gag you!" Ben Harvey yelled. "If you know enough about this to confess, you know who got shot!"

ROCKING back in the saddle, Koleen fought at the ropes which bound him. Confessing to a stage holdup was one thing. But shoving his neck into a hangman's noose was another matter. Suppose something happened to Charlie Norris? An accident, snake bite, gun shot—and Old Tom? Koleen thought of his father, a killer . . . wanted by the law!

The few scattered lights of War Bonnet showed far below, and to the right as they began a slow downhill jog. Koleen rode dumbly, stricken with a fear that made mockery of his elation at having taunted the old man. Clear himself and Old Tom would die! Yet not to clear himself . . . .

The posse jogged into town, separating and dwindling away as Ben Harvey dismissed them. When finally they reached the jail, there were just the two of them. Ben Harvey drew his gun and reached far out to untie the ropes binding Koleen. Then he waved him toward the jail, inside, and into a cell.

"Who's dead, Ben?"

The sheriff had crossed to the front part of the building and dropped into a wire-braced chair. Without turning,

he said, "We can trade on that, Koleen. Who you shielding?"

Alarm ran across Koleen. "Why? What makes you think I'd stick my neck in a noose just to—"

"All right, Bruce." A weary patience was in the old lawman's tones. "Just keep thinking of that noose. And keep thinking how the longer you keep quiet the closer it is getting to your own neck."

Bruce Koleen gripped the bars, staring blindly at the chunky little sheriff. Shrewd with his many years of office, Harvey had his own devious ways of knowing things. Even as now . . . or was he guessing? Koleen couldn't tell, and the uncertainty rubbed at him until he half shouted:

"But if you didn't believe me, why'd you bring me in? Damn you, Ben Harvey! What're you trying to pull?"

Harvey turned slowly until he stared directly into Koleen's face. And the lawman's eyes were bitter cold.

"You maybe lied to protect somebody for some reason. And that reason, or that somebody, is pretty closely connected to this killing. Maybe you're willing to follow it up and finally hang. But I don't think so. I think you'll talk eventually. When you do, I want you where I can hear it."

Koleen couldn't answer the lawman's logic and, under the level stare, he fumbled awkwardly at the bars, finally turning back to the bunk at the rear of the cell.

Ben Harvey sighed and stretched his legs. He got a pipe from his shirt pocket and got it going. Silence built between them, a solid heavy pressure of patience pitted against impatience, of uncertainty pitted against—what? The sound of boots stomping the plank walk outside came almost as a relief to Koleen.

A man stepped in through the wide open door of the jail office and he looked up.

Ben Harvey nodded. "Hello, Red."

Koleen caught the low murmur of Red Neilson's voice. "Just heard you got Bruce Koleen in jail for killing Clint Foley." When Ben Harvey made no reply, Red Neilson laughed. Good old Red. He'd stick by him till hell froze, Koleen thought. "There must be some mistake, Ben. Bruce and Sarah Foley was figuring on getting marired soon as he got himself a stake."

"Ever figure maybe he got it, Red?" Harvey asked gently.

NUMBNESS touched the fingers that Bruce Koleen wrapped about the cell bars. Clint Foley—dead! Neilson was saying something, but he didn't catch it, wasn't listening. His mind had churned away and was sweeping back to the last time he'd seen Clint.

They'd had a fight, and Clint had fist-whipped hell out of him. That had been the time Clint had caught Sarah and him sitting in the shadows of the Foley porch making plans for a run-away marriage. There'd been words, Koleen remembered. Words—rising tempers—and Clint dishing out a first class whipping that had sent the night caving in on his upturned face.

Old Tom had snorted with indignation, he remembered. But the old man hadn't said anything to him about it for a week or so. Then he'd come home fairly frothing with outrage.

"I heard in War Bonnet how you been telling that Clint Foley is a better man than you," Old Tom had stormed. "God A'mighty, boy! Ain't you got any pride about you? Where's your fight? Why, if your Ma and me had said we was licked every time something went against us—"

"I didn't say I was through," he had pointed out. "I just said Clint could fist-whip me. And he can. But he can't change Sarah's mind. Or mine."

"He thinks different," Old Tom had grumbled. "Kind of a proud cuss anyhow, that Foley. And now . . . ."

And now, Koleen thought dismally, Clint Foley was dead.

Red Neilson's words reached him as from a vast distance. "Can I see him,

Ben? We been good friends a long time, Bruce Koleen and me. I'd like to—"

Koleen could hear Ben Harvey say something about it being too late tonight, then the thump of Neilson's boots as he strode out. The night quieted.

Koleen started to call out. The quiet was rasping his nerves like no sound ever could. He wanted to talk, to pour questions at the grumpy dour little lawman until he knew just what had happened to Clint Foley, and when. He wanted . . . and for a brief moment vision of Sarah's features floated across his mind. Then he was seeing Old Tom's harsh unbending features, hearing the bitterness, the accusations.

Why, Koleen thought fleetingly, he might have done the whole thing on purpose. Gunshot Clint Foley off the stage coach cause Clint had whipped a Koleen and made no bones of it. He might have—

A horse romped up the street to slow just outside the office. Bruce Koleen whipped about. Harvey, too, he noticed, was watching the door though he appeared relaxed and unheeding. For a time there was no sound, no movement; and Bruce Koleen swore aloud.

Still there was no sound. Then finally Old Tom Koleen blocked the doorway, treading silently for all his weight as he moved on inside the jail office.

"Found these in the barn, Ben." Old Tom dropped the sacks on Sheriff Harvey's desk. "I never figured a kid of mine would pull a trick like that. I still can't figure it." He raised his head, throwing back rugged old shoulders and turning to face the cell block. "A quitter—always hunting the easiest road, the softest bed. Well, by God, it's come."

He was through talking then. He swung about and walked stiffly out into the night.

Bruce Koleen stared numbly. He'd thought the old man had fought it out with himself and had decided to square himself with the law and with his son. He'd thought the old man had come in to give himself up. But, instead, Old Tom —with his play of outraged parenthood —had added another loop to the noose about his throat.

RAGE began boiling in Bruce Koleen. "Let me out of here, Ben!" he yelled. "I played the damned fool in ever confessing to this damned mess! I didn't do it and I can prove it!"

Ben Harvey rose slowly, crossing to peer through the steel bars at Bruce. "You confessed in front of a dozen men, Bruce. Clint Foley is dead, and most men know how things were between you two. How can I turn you out of that cell now?"

"But, damn it, Ben!" Bruce stabbed a finger toward the express sacks on the lawman's desk. "How do you know Old Tom don't know more about them than I do? He knew where they were cached. He—"

"And I know Old Tom." Harvey shook his head. "Bed rock all the way, that old man. Knowed him for forty-eight years or better. I don't reckon there's wolf strain in Old Tom Koleen."

"But I can prove—"

"In the morning you'll get your chance." Ben Harvey moved across the jail office and turned the lamp down low. "You'll get all the chance to talk you want. Good night, Bruce."

"Ben!" But the lawman turned toward the door and left.

Bruce Koleen flung himself against the steel door. As well to have thrown himself against Painted Butte or that rock knob over west of Loblinger's. Bruised and shaken he drew back. Sarah Foley's face swam before him, and he wondered if she would believe that he had killed her brother. Or would her love lift high a trust in him?

He thought again of Old Tom. And hatred caused his fingers to knot into lumpy fists. He'd taken the blame to give the old man a few minutes breathing time, to show that loyalty wasn't confined alone to the elder of the Koleen family. And now, deliberately . . . .

A whisper brought him upright. He

twisted, staring toward the door.

Red Neilson had appeared like a wraith. Now he grinned at Bruce, but a strained tautness gave his lips a wooden distortion.

"I tried to get Lawyer Baumgartner for you, Bruce. But he won't do nothing without he gets some money in advance. I was figuring on riding out to see Old Tom—"

Young Koleen laughed grimly. "Old Tom spend money to hire me a lawyer? Hell, this is tickling him pink!"

Neilson shook his head. "I don't know the straight of this, but Ben Harvey figures you ain't got a chance. I—I got a crowbar here that says he's wrong. We'll spring the door and you can run for it. Otherwise they'll hang you higher'n hell for killing Clint Foley."

Koleen grinned. Break free and ride out to the Lazy K. Watch Old Tom's eyes bulge when he told him that Ben Harvey had a foolproof alibi clearing a certain Bruce Koleen. Watch him sweat and worry and curse. Then hit saddle and clear out while the old man stayed behind and fumbled around trying to keep the Lazy K afloat.

Neilson had inserted the crowbar and now was bowing his back, straining until the flesh of his face darkened with exertion. Koleen reached through the bars, adding his weight to the lever. Something cracked. Punished metal chirped and creaked. And then the door warped awry.

"Your horse is outside, Bruce," Red Neilson panted. "Ride for it. And if you ever hit El Paso, look up a feller named Butch Bender. Tell him I sent you. He'll fix you up."

Koleen nodded. But he wasn't aiming on heading toward El Paso. Wyoming, it would be. Cool morning, damp cool evenings; a land that was green and rich and—and promising. He turned away from Red Neilson impatiently.

Ben Harvey hadn't left a sixgun that he could see. But a wall rack held two saddle carbines, and he lifted one as he headed toward the street door.

"So long, Bruce."

The strained whisper twisted him around, and he saw Neilson close behind him, pistol drawn. Neilson's face was white. The gun was at full cock.

"Hey!" a cry came from down the street. "Hold up there!"

Koleen recognized Ben Harvey's voice. Red Neilson gave an inarticulate little cry and leaped past him through the doorway.

Bruce saw the revolver lifting, and he plunged with the carbine, smashing the walnut stock against Neilson's head. That would clear Red, he thought fleetingly. And at the same time keep the man from crazily shooting at the sheriff.

Ben Harvey cried out again as Bruce Koleen darted under the hitchrail and grabbed his mount away from the pole. He swung up, whirling the horse in a cloud of fine dust. Ben Harvey was getting near, a sixgun swinging in his hand, he saw. And he reined savagely, sending the horse close alongside the jail toward the blackness of the alley.

A LOW riding moon banked shadows layer upon layer along the shed-lined avenue, and Bruce Koleen gave his mount its head. The edge of town drifted past. He was clear, free running, the whole wide night open for him to hide in.

He kept the horse running, fighting through mesquite and up a slope to where broken lips of ridges riffled endlessly southward. There was no sound, no movement, and he paused to breathe his horse, then pushed on again. The night shifted by, roughed with hills and low lifeless stretches of valley. And then he angled along a long dry wash that drove deep into the Lazy K range that he'd always called home. But now . . . .

When the buildings showed clear and black-etched he slid down, running the last few yards toward the glow of lamplight. He had shoved the door wide and was inside, standing hip-shot against the wall when Old Tom came into the kitchen with a lamp in one hand, a

drawn sixgun in the other.

They stared at each other, their eyes alone alive in the brown taut masks of flesh and skin that should have been living faces.

"You broke jail!" Old Tom charged harshly.

"You'd let them hang me!" Bruce countered, equally harsh voiced, equally cold.

Again they measured each other, alive to the antagonism that flicked between them, sifting for sign of intent, of motive, of indicated trend of thought. Old Tom placed the lamp on the table, rocking the sixgun to full cock.

Bruce shifted the carbine.

"A son of mine a thief! A robber! A killer!" Old Tom lifted the sixgun. "You can expect no haven in my house!"

Anger flared high, and Bruce Koleen swore. "You'd let them hang me, then? Drive me out and let me be hanged for your own dirty work?" Staring at the sixgun, he tossed the carbine aside. "Shoot then, damn you! Then you can shout your proud, strait-laced hypocrisy to the world! Or keep me here until Ben Harvey gets here. But you forgot Charlie Norris. What'll you do to keep him quiet?"

The old man stirred, lowering the sixgun while he peered intently at the strange, harsh featured man who was his son.

"You confessed to it, boy."

"To save you, damn you! I found that mail pouch where you shoved it in the manger! I didn't want you to—"

Old Tom Koleen's craggy face altered unreadably, but his voice husked, "I found where you hid it in the oat bin."

Hoof racket echoed across the night, filtering in through the open door. Old Tom made a move toward closing it, then stopped.

"You—you didn't do it, then, boy?"

For a long, deliberate moment Bruce held himself untouched by the old man's change. But there was no mistaking the joy that misted Old Tom's eyes, the tremor that touched and would not leave his mouth. And, seeing the old man thus affected, his own doubts began to leave him.

"But who, then, Tom?" he wondered aloud. "I thought—"

"Your pal, Red Neilson, rode in here bare minutes ahead of you," old Tom said. "He needed a horse bad, said his'n threw a shoe. I was fixing supper so I just told him to help hisself. But I never figured—"

Bruce shook his head. "Not him, Tom. Hell, he helped me jump jail. He wouldn't a done that if—"

Old Tom shrugged. "Maybe he didn't figure on you getting clear. And with you busting out of jail, it looked like a sure sign of guilt—enough to douse the sheriff's doubts. Like maybe he didn't figure on you getting home afore he had time to transfer them express sacks from his old hoss to the one I loaned him. I don't know what happened. But—but, you crazy damn kid, taking blame for a thing like that just cause you thought I done it!"

The posse sound grew louder, swept into a roar of many men and many horses bearing down upon the Lazy K. Bruce Koleen grinned as he crossed the kitchen to shove the coffee on the stove.

"Come to think of it," he mused, "Red did have a gun in his hand afore there was need. Maybe he figured—" He looked at Old Tom, and suddenly he knew for a certainty that Red Neilson's wildness had finally caught up to him. It wouldn't be hard to prove.

Old Tom was staring into space. "Crazy damn thing," the old man was murmuring. "Loyal enough to risk hanging for his father. Loyal enough, by God—to whup hell out of drought and bad times. And I thought he was yellow." The old man suddenly looked at Bruce—and grinned.

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"Drop that shotgun, Mister!"

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LASH OF FURY

By D. S. HALACY, JR.

FOR A SILVER dollar Clint Marshall would have cut the sickly grin from the station agent's face with his whip. The bony man left off berating the team and turned to glare at him, face twitching, shifty eyes daring Clint to try something.

"What you think you can do about it?" he challenged.

Clint spat. "I'm making a report to the superintendent next time he comes through," he said. "You don't whip my team like that!" The horses were still cringing and the marks showed plainly from the lashing they had taken.

The grin left Elkin's pinched face and color flushed it nearly purple. He hurled the whip into a corner of the stable.

"You're through!" he flung out through clenched teeth. "Damn you, Marshall, you're a troublemaker. I've told them that before." He took a quick step forward. "Pick up your money tomorrow night and clear out. If I see you around again I'll have you horsewhipped out of the place."

Clint's left hand shot out and twisted up a wad of the agent's shirt front, dragging Elkins close. But as quickly as it came, the blinding rage passed and he laughed loudly in the man's face.

"You wouldn't like to try it yourself, would you?" he asked coldly, as Elkins

twisted free. The agent was inches taller than Clint's slab-muscled six feet, but without the driver's massive chest and corded arms.

"Mind your step," the threatened man said. "I can queer you with every line from here to San Francisco." Elkins stamped out of the stable and Clint swore softly. The man disgusted him. Clint Marshall was a whip, a real driver. It hurt to have to take this from an agent. It hurt to be fired too. Times had changed from the hectic days of the fifties. A good staging job wasn't easy to find now. He shrugged and walked to the horses, patting them roughly as he swung them out into the yard.

Thinking of the ugly welts on their sides, he gripped his whip tightly, wanting to lay into Elkins with it. If it weren't for the money, he'd quit now and beat the devil out of the agent. But he needed this last pay money.

He led the team to the stage and backed them into the traces. The big off-leader snorted and pawed the ground. Clint stroked the animal's neck and talked to him, calming him. There was a score to settle with Elkins, all right, but it could wait until after this last trip.

THE CONCORD was loaded. The boot was filled with merchandise for the mines, and there were four passengers inside. Elkins brought out the bill of lading and shoved it at Clint, avoiding his eyes. Clint folded it twice and stuck it in his hat, then climbed to the box. He slapped the reins on the wheelers's rumps and the stage moved out from the sidewalk, swaying easily in the thoroughbraces.

Out of town he let the horses idle along, saving them for the long climb into the hills ahead. The mountain road kept his hands busy but his mind was on Elkins and what had happened today. He held nothing but hate in his mind for the man.

Clint swung down from the box at Banner, stiff from the long haul. He helped the passengers out, then went to watch the man from the mine unload the boot. "Sign this, will you?" he asked one of them, taking the bill of lading from his hat. The man scrawled his name on the paper and Clint reached for it when he saw the line superintendent coming down the other side of the street.

They must really be worried! "Surprised to see you up here, Mr. Lake," he said, shaking the stocky man's hand. "Didn't know you was anywhere in the neighborhood."

Lake grunted. There was worry in his face and he took off his hat to mop at his bald head. "Hope you're not the only one," he retorted. Then he lowered his voice, looking over his shoulder. "Keep quiet about when you're leaving on the return trip, understand?"

"Sure," Clint said, frowning. Something was up. They walked to the hotel and Clint ordered his meal. Lake sat by him, stirring his coffee long after it had cooled.

"I'm riding shotgun with you on the way back," he said suddenly, pushing the coffee aside as if it wasn't his.

Clint drained his own cup and finished the pie. "It's your outfit," he said. "Don't make much difference to me one way or the other."

Lake frowned. "What kind of talk is that?" he snapped.

"Your agent in town gave me my walking papers as of when I get back from this run." Clint reached for a toothpick as they left the counter.

Lake caught him by the shoulder. "Why?" he demanded. Clint told him and the superintendent listened with a scowl. "Damn you, Clint," he said. "Why can't you get along with Elkins?"

"Same reason I don't hanker none for skunks," Clint said sharply. They went to the mine office, Lake pushing open the door.

"I'll see what I can do," he said. "You're a good driver, Clint, but you're a hell of a mess of trouble, too."

EVENING," he said to the two men behind the panelled counter. They nodded curtly and Clint waved a hand, recognizing the mine owners. They looked

jumpy and Lake took out his watch and glanced up at the big clock on the wall.

"You're a couple of minutes slow," he said. "We plan to start at half past twelve unless you gentleman have any ideas."

"What?" Clint stormed protest. "I'm tired, Lake, I need some sleep before I drive that coach back down the mountain. Who ever heard of making the run in the dark anyhow? Them horses ain't packin' lanterns, you know."

Lake held up a hand. "Take it easy," he said patiently. "Maybe Elkins is right about you at that. If you can't do it, I'll drive the stage myself." He looked steadily at Clint, eyes challenging.

Clint swore. "All right," he said in disgust. "I can't see an old man like you bust his fool neck, or maybe even kill one of the horses." The remark about Elkins being right rubbed him the wrong way; but underneath he knew Lake was depending on him. The mine owners nodded silent agreement.

"Just so you get that dust to town for the through stage in the morning," one of them said. "We won't sleep until we hear it's safe on its way East. Two-hundred-thousand is a lot of money."

Clint leaned forward on the counter, sucking in his breath. "Did you say—?"

"He did," Lake cut in, "and he wasn't just talking to hear himself, neither. Now do you see why I'm in such a sweat?" He lit a stogie, looking for a place to drop the match and finally let it fall to the floor.

Clint whistled softly, cocking his head toward the superintendent. "I begin to sympathize with you, Lake," he said, half a smile creasing his face. "That's more money than I make all year."

Lake shoved him roughly toward the door. "Bring the stage over here," he laughed. "Let's get this stuff on while the street's quiet." Hand on the knob, Clint turned to the old men back of the counter.

"Rest easy, gents. Suppose you do lose it, it's only money!" He left them sputtering and went through the dim light from

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store fronts to the stage. The horses shuddered at his approach, shaking big heads restlessly. They hadn't been rested, but there was nothing he could do about that. What the devil, thinking about the team had got him in enough trouble already. Time to think about himself for a while.

"Easy boy," he stroked the big lead horse as he led them down the street to the mine office. It was a quiet time, there weren't over four men in sight as he stopped in front of the lighted window.

LAKE opened the door, struggling out onto the sidewalk, one hand holding up his end of a treasure box. Clint whistled again as he helped them wrestle it up under the seat on the stage. Two-hundred-thousand dollars! He'd heard about loads like that, but this was the first time he'd ever hauled that much pay dirt. They went back in and he helped Lake with the other boxes. There were five in all, each one heavy enough to make them strain. Lake barked his knuckles going through the door with the last one, nearly dropping his end and cursing lividly.

"I'll be glad when this is done," he said soulfully.

There were no formalities. Clint didn't sing out destination this time. There were no passengers, and the two mine owners were the only people to see them go. Clint picked up the ribbons, whistling sharply to the team. They rolled slowly out of the mining town, swinging onto the first steep drop and he set the brakes, half-standing on the pitching box.

"I like it better when I can see," he said aloud to Lake. The superintendent made no answer. Clint eased back onto the seat and they rode in silence as the horses picked their way along the vague, dark trail.

Clint turned to Lake once, about to suggest lighting out for the north with the load of gold. The look on the superintendent's face told him he wouldn't appreciate the joke. Lake gripped the shotgun stiffly, eyes hard on the road ahead. Clint shrugged. The odds were a thousand to one against trouble. Who could know? He'd lay money that only the four of them, the mine owners, Lake and himself, on the whole mountain even knew there was a gold shipment. And at night; he laughed to himself. Lake was sweating himself for nothing.

His mind idle, his thoughts drifted back to Elkins, and the hate he held for the skunk came to him. He tensed on the ribbons, hands bunching. He forced himself to ease up. Lake was on Clint's side. If they made the haul down the mountain safely, the superintendent would be in a good humor. Lake appreciated his ability. The thorn in the whole business was Elkins. If Clint did keep his job, how could he put up with the man? Sooner or later things would come to a head again. Next time he might not be able to hold back.

He held the team to a walk as they swung around the switchback at the creek and on the slight rise beyond they barely made headway. And then it happened, so quickly, and with such complete surprise, that all he could do was throw up his hands when the man at the horses's bridles shouted.

"Drop that shotgun, mister!" the road-agent yelled harshly, voice muffled in the bandanna covering half his face. Three other men appeared, all on horses, all masked. Mind racing, Clint looked searchingly at all four, for some hint, some clue to their identities. Lake was standing, swearing hoarsely. He had been caught as Clint was. It was so damned impossible!

IN THE darkness it was no good trying to place any of the men. Masked and under hats, all the men looked alike in the darkness. Clint licked at his lips. This would set the stage line back on its heels no little. Lake would feel it, maybe Elkins too. Clint liked that thought, anyway.

"Dump out the stuff," the road-agent ordered, waving a gun at the box. "And don't get any noble ideas or you'll bleed to death in a hurry."

"You heard him," Clint said grimly as Lake stood there, unmoving. He knew the superintendent's thought. Another gun lay on the floor in easy reach, but with four men drawing down on them it would be suicide.

"Come on," he snapped. "These jaspers ain't foolin' tonight." Protesting, Lake helped him drag the heavy boxes and heave them over the side. The bandits worked quickly, shooting open the locks and transferring the bags to waiting pack animals. Grudgingly Clint gave them credit. The whole thing was well planned. In five minutes it was done, two of the bandits covering Lake and Clint every second while the others worked.

One of the men on horseback rode close, a gun in each hand. His voice was thick through the cloth over his face.

"Thanks for your co-operation," he said. "Now you're going on a little ride." Clint racked his brain to place the voice, but it could be anyone. A pale shaft of moonlight glinted on the rider, spurs flashing and the side of the gray horse shining dully in the dim light. Clint looked close, stiff now with a sudden crazy thought. And in that second Lake went for the shotgun.

Clint's mind raced. It was only a hunch, but savagely he kicked out and Lake screamed in pain. The gunman fired wildly as Clint yelled, "Don't be a damned fool, Lake!" The shotgun clattered loudly on the road as the echo of the shot rang wildly among the rocks.

"Watch it, mister," the bandit on the gray horse said tightly. He nodded to Clint. "You've got more sense than your pardner, friend."

"Thanks," Clint returned drily. Lake held his hand and moaned in pain and anger.

"You blamed fool," he muttered. "You're fired now for sure."

Clint held his tongue, eyes on the gray horse and rider. "Ready back there?" the man snapped over his shoulder. There was grunted assent and the bandit spurred his horse savagely against the stage team,

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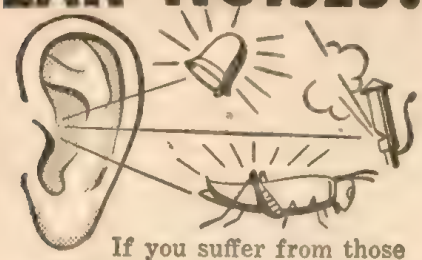

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both guns going off together right over the startled horses. The rider kicked at the lead horse and then swung away as the team ran wild down the road, picking up speed as it dropped off again and twisted to the left.

Clint grabbed for the reins, standing in the box now, trying madly to brake before they reached the curve. Lake got hold of the reins, hauling back with Clint in an effort to stop the frenzied team.

Shots echoed behind them and he knew it was hopeless. Lake swore incessantly. Clint saved his breath for prayers. There was no stopping the team now, no stopping them until they hit the valley and ran themselves out. They were crazy wild, running blindly, and the stage jolted and slued on the dark road.

CLINT fought it with all there was in him and Lake did what he could. They made the first of the curves and swung into the second, brakes full on and reins taut in big fists. As though unchecked the horses drove for the precipice. Clint stayed with the coach until the last breath, knowing it was no use. He jumped right behind Lake, over the inside wheels of the coach. He hit, rolling, clawing to stay on the road, hearing the team and coach as they plunged down the ravine, wishing with all his soul he couldn't hear it. There was nothing they could do but head for town; the team was past help. Lake walked with a painful limp, and he held his tongue until they hit the valley flats.

"Why did you do it?" he asked evenly. "I could have plugged that one with the two guns on us and——"

"You're mighty anxious to leave this world," Clint said. "He'd have killed us both if he'd had to. I'm not ready to go yet."

Lake groaned. "I am," he said. "Wait until the owners hear about this. They'll break me so far down the line—" he stopped, shaking his head. "Damn you, Clint," he swore, "I wish to the devil Elkins had fired you yesterday."

Clint was silent. He might be wrong.

It was a crazy hunch at best, it was just a guess. But it was all he had. If he was wrong, he couldn't be much worse off. He still had his skin. But those marks on the gunman's horse.

They woke a farmer and got two horses. It was nine when they rode into town, and Clint went first to the stable. Lake watched, smoldering anger in his eyes.

"What do you need a whip for now?" he taunted.

"Maybe nothing," Clint admitted. "Come along and see." Lake trailed behind and when Clint pulled up at Elkin's place the man asked, "Why come here? You got no business with Elkins. Especially now."

"That's what I aim to find out." He swung down from the horse and strode to the house.

ELKINS!" he yelled, pounding on the door with the butt of his whip. Lake joined him, looking at Clint as though he were truly crazy. There was no answer and Clint put his shoulder to the door and shoved. The door burst in and Clint swung through it. Elkins spun around in the back doorway, clutching a bag in one hand.

"Wouldn't be going someplace?" Clint asked, slapping the whip into his left hand.

"I told you you were through," the agent snapped, coming back through the door. "Hello, Lake. I had to get rid of this tramp. He's no good." Elkins looked tensely at the super.

Clint cut in before Lake could answer. "Where's the gold?" he demanded tautly. "And you'd better talk or I'll choke it out of you." Lake gasped and Elkins went white. Then he threw back his head and laughed loudly.

"Have you gone crazy?" he demanded. "Lake—"

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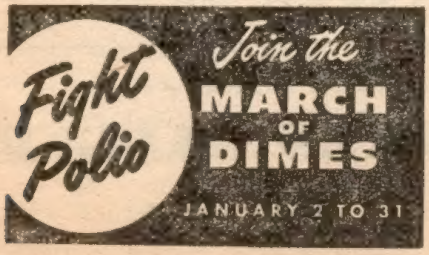

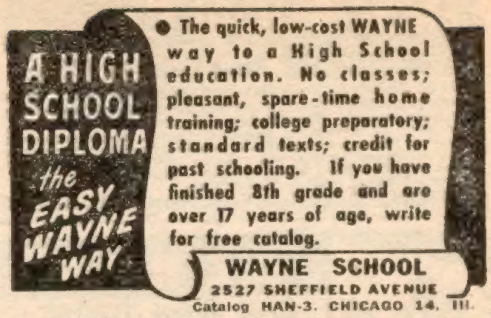
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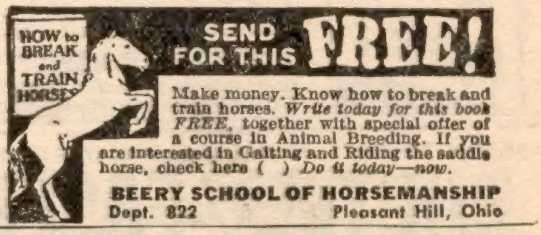
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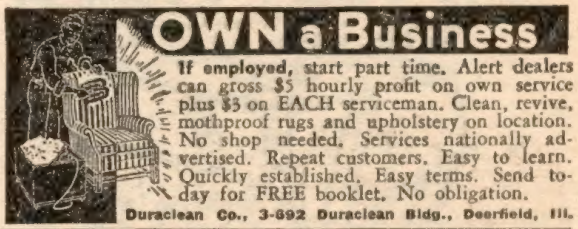
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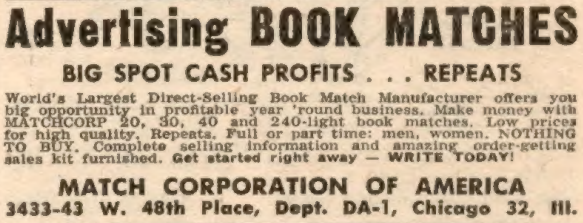
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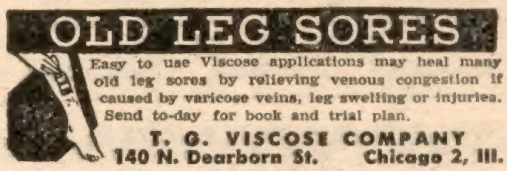
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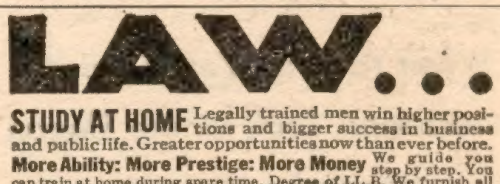
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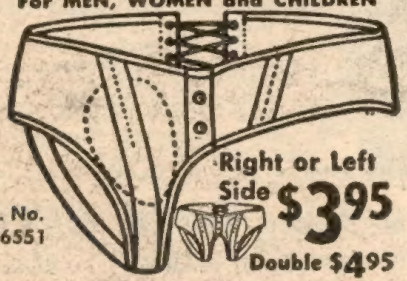

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"You were riding a gray gelding," Clint said, forcing his hand because he knew he had to do it. "I'm going to take you, Elkins," he said. "I'm going to beat you within a whisper of Hell, and then the law can have you."

Elkins broke, his face paling again, and he leaped back. His hand darted for the gun at his belt and he threw the bag from his other hand. He drew fast, but Clint was faster. Ducking the bag he lashed out with the whip and the leather hissed as it wound around Elkins. The gun roared and smoke filled the room as Lake dived for the agent. The .45 skittered across the floor as the superintendent pinned Elkins down.

"Now tell us where the gold is, or I'll cut you into small chunks and feed you to the horses," Clint threatened, flexing the whip menacingly. It was bluff but it was all he had.

"Don't!" Elkins yelled. "The dust is in the shed out back. My share of it. The other three are staying at the hotel. You'll find them there." Clint grinned at Lake and coiled the big whip. His crazy hunch had paid off the long odds.

"Feelin' any better now?" he asked. Lake nodded helplessly.

"How did you know?" he got out, looking dazedly from Clint to the trussed up agent.

"It was easy," Clint said, leading Lake out back. The superintendent swore when he saw the angry slashes on the horses' sides. Clint rubbed the animal gently.

"A skunk like Elkins always runs true to form. I noticed the blood on the gelding when they held us up. He'd roweled him up plenty. It wasn't real proof, but tied with the fact that he'd know, I took the chance."

Lake shook his head slowly and stuck out a hand. "Shake," he said, "and forget what I said about being fired."

Read

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Every Month!

$100.00 A WEEK in CASH
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There's a big advantage to buying this policy by mail. This method of selling is less costly for us—and that's another reason why we are able to offer so much protection for so little money.

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The money is all yours—for any purpose you want to use it. There are no hidden meanings or big words in the policy. We urge you and every family and also individuals to send for this policy on our 10 day free trial offer—and be convinced that no other hospital plan offers you so much for your $1.00 a month!

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Benefits At Small Extra Cost
Women who will some day have babies will want to take advantage of a special low cost maternity rider. Pays $50.00 for childbirth confinement either in the hospital or at home, after policy has been in force 10 months. Double the amount on twins.

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In lieu of other regular benefits policy pays these benefits if polio strikes—
For Hospital Bills, up to $500.00
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TOTAL OF $1,500.00

3c A DAY IS ALL YOU PAY
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Wonderful news! This new policy covers everyone from infancy to age 70! When sickness or accident sends you or a member of your family to the hospital—this policy PAYS $100.00 PER WEEK for a day, a month, even a year . . . or just as long as you stay in the hospital. What a wonderful feeling to know your savings are protected and you won't have to go into debt. The money is paid DIRECT TO YOU to spend as you wish. This remarkable new Family Hospital Protection costs only 3c a day for each adult 18 to 59 years of age, and for age 60 to 70 only 4½c a day. This policy even covers children up to 18 years of age with cash benefits of $50.00 a week while in the hospital—yet the cost is only 1½c a day for each child! Benefits paid while confined to any recognized hospital, except government hospitals, rest homes and clinics, spas or sanitariums. Pick your own doctor. Naturally this wonderful policy is issued only to individuals and families now in good health; otherwise the cost would be sky high. But once protected, you are covered for about every sickness or accident. Persons covered may return as often as necessary to the hospital within the year.

This is What $100.00 a Week Can Mean to You When in the Hospital for Sickness or Accident

Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills and maybe the surgeon's bill too . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on. What a Godsend this READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU. Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay you for time lost from your job or business. Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you.

Examine This Policy Without Cost or Obligation—Read It—Talk It Over—Then Decide

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You are invited to inspect this new kind of Family Hospital Plan. We will send the actual policy to you for ten days at no cost or obligation. Talk it over with your banker, doctor, lawyer or spiritual adviser. Then make up your mind. This policy backed by the full resources of the nationally known Service Life Insurance Company of Omaha, Nebraska—organized under the laws of Nebraska and with policyholders in every state. SEND NO MONEY—just your name and address! No obligation, of course!

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THE SERVICE LIFE FAMILY HOSPITAL PLAN

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FOR GREATEST BENEFIT IN REDUCING by massage use **Spot REDUCER** with or without electricity—Also used as an aid in the relief of pains for which massage is indicated.

TAKE OFF EXCESS WEIGHT!

Don't Stay FAT—You Can Lose POUNDS and INCHES SAFELY

Without Risking HEALTH

Take pounds off—keep slim and trim with Spot Reducer! Remarkable new invention which uses one of the most effective reducing methods employed by masseurs and turkish baths—MASSAGE!

LIKE a magic wand, the "Spot Reducer" obeys your every wish. Most any part of your body where it is loose and flabby, wherever you have extra weight and inches, the "Spot Reducer" can aid you in acquiring a youthful, slender and graceful figure. The beauty of this scientifically designed Reducer is that the method is so simple, and easy, the results quick, sure and harmless. No exercise or strict diets. No steambaths, drugs or laxatives.

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